



MONTCLAIR STATE
UNIVERSITY

Montclair State University
**Montclair State University Digital
Commons**

Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects

5-2011

Visual Symbols of the Damaged Families in Sam Shepard's Family Trilogy

Kathryn Ann Baran
Montclair State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baran, Kathryn Ann, "Visual Symbols of the Damaged Families in Sam Shepard's Family Trilogy" (2011).
Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects. 770.
<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd/770>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

*Visual Symbols of the Damaged Families
in Sam Shepard's Family Trilogy*

by

Kathryn Ann Baran

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

May 2011

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

Certified by:

Marietta Morrissey
Dean of the College of
Humanities and Social Sciences

Date

May 9, 2011

Thesis Committee:

Rita Jacobs
Thesis Sponsor

Daniel Bronson
Committee Member

Tom Benediktsson
Committee Member

Daniel Bronson
Department Chairperson

Abstract

Sam Shepard is a playwright who provides extensive stage directions for his actors. Although many literary critics disapprove of his control of the stage space through his stage directions, his specific notes on set design, costume, props and gestures offer a commentary on the characters and their actions in his dramas.

Metaphorically, Shepard's clever positioning of his visual images in *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, and *True West* suggests that his characters find it necessary to damage each other's securities, to destroy their own haunted pasts, or to disrupt the family experience and the myth of the perfect American family. The destruction done to the domestic sets and the props on stage is rooted in the Gothic tradition. Since the family home represents the family living inside, the chaos and the damage on stage are symbols of the decline of the families.

The following pages will examine Shepard's command of the visual images seen on the stage within the family trilogy. The destruction committed on stage is often unsettling because Shepard has his characters damage domestic objects; items that normally represent family unity and safety are thrown, destroyed, burned or pissed on in order for the audience to recognize the breakdown of communication that is so common in Shepard's dramas. The damage done to the domestic items produces chaos on the stage and acts as a representation of the relationships among Shepard's characters, a technique that offers a visually stimulating experience for his audiences.

VISUAL SYMBOLS OF THE DAMAGED FAMILIES

IN SAM SHEPARD'S FAMILY TRILOGY

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts in English

by

KATHRYN ANN BARAN

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2011

Copyright c 2011 by *Kathryn Ann Baran*. All rights reserved.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Rita Jacobs for sharing her passion for literature and teaching during both my undergraduate and graduate experiences at Montclair State University. My thesis writing process would not be complete without her on my committee to push me even when I was near my breaking point.

Thank you to my committee members, Dan Bronson and Tom Benediktsson, for introducing me to new texts to teach and to love. Their feedback during the thesis writing process has been invaluable.

Thanks to Monika Elbert for her contagious enthusiasm and passion for literature. Her support and kindness throughout the years has helped me realize my potential as a scholar.

Much appreciation is sent to my friends who have always pushed me and energized me in positive ways throughout my academic journey.

Finally, special thanks goes to my family: Mom, Dad, Chris and Shannon. They have supported me in various ways throughout my graduate experience. I appreciate their unending efforts to make everything I do stress free and positive.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: <i>Curse of the Starving Class</i>	6
Chapter 2: <i>Buried Child</i>	25
Chapter 3: <i>True West</i>	51
Conclusion.....	71
Works Cited.....	73

Introduction

In a rare question and answer session at the Cherry Lane Theatre in Manhattan's West Village in 2006, Sam Shepard intimately discussed his craft with regards to the creative process, his artistic inspirations and his deep respect for Samuel Beckett. Asked about his use of stage directions in his plays, Shepard surprisingly responded that he "doesn't like" them. Although Shepard might not care for the limits that stage directions impose on the characters' positioning on stage, his comprehensive directions are one of the many factors that separate him from other playwrights. Shepard continued,

I like them abbreviated and concise. The problem with stage directions is that you're trying to locate the space, and the point of view is always shifting. So you have to work in the blueprint. So the best way to create direction is probably the traditional method, which is from the proscenium. You have to sort of designate where it's happening. Look at Beckett's stage direction. It's very specific and precise. (Bartels 87)

Stage directions bring the dramatist's vision to life; they encompass the way the playwright sees the gestures acted out, the voices heard and the props and set arranged. These production and stylistic choices are often subtle comments on the characters' personalities, living conditions, social statuses and relationships with other players in the drama. However, Sam Shepard's stage directions seem to blaze an even deeper metaphoric meaning into the intricacies of the production. Much of Shepard's storytelling is attached to the symbolic props, gestures, and costumes that he commands through the stage directions. As concise as Shepard intends to be, he still offers detailed notes that dictate the course that the visuals take throughout the drama.

The uniqueness in the style that evolves from Shepard's extensive stage directions differentiates his plays from those of other playwrights. Positioned next to minimalist writers like Samuel Beckett and David Mamet, whose stark stage directions call for stripped-down, fast-paced, dialogue-driven plays, Shepard's stage directions offer lengthy and explicit specifications for the staging of his dramas. Mamet's notoriously lone stage direction, "*pause*," epitomizes his focus on language and interaction rather than the positioning of characters or props on stage. Yannis Tzioumakis' essay, "The Poetics of Performance in the Cinema of David Mamet: Against Embellishment," discusses Mamet's declarations of his own unadorned craft. He writes, "Mamet's compelling declaration that 'good drama has no stage directions' testifies to the performative potential of the dialogue text and explains the playwright/screenwriter's habit of keeping stage directions or other type of commentary to an absolute minimum" (Tzioumakis 92). Mamet grants substantial credit to the language of an author's script, arguing that if the dialogue is well-written, then the actors will produce an effective performance without the necessity of stage directions. However, Shepard's dramas prove that his directions are essential to creating the visual dynamic on stage.

David Mamet is not alone in his aversion to stage directions. In his essay, "*Curse of the Starving Class and the Logic of Destruction*," William E. Kleb acknowledges the neglectful attitude towards stage directions from directors, designers, critics and actors, calling them the playwright's "buried children" (Kleb 4). However, Shepard's stage directions offer a visually chaotic world, rich with metaphors and symbolism, and Kleb argues against reductive views on stage directions:

[Shepard's] process may begin with the voices of the characters in his head, but it clearly includes the visualization of action and image within the three-dimensional stage as well. And this visualization is an essential part of the text, its meaning... What, then, do Shepard's stage directions contribute to this text, and how do they work? At the simplest level, one common feature stands out: Shepard seems to be much more interested in movement, in action (or the lack of it), in pose and presence, than he is in telling the actor what a character thinks or feels. (Kleb 4-5)

Kleb accurately equates Shepard's visualization with meaning, and this relationship is what drives the metaphors that Shepard develops throughout his family trilogy. The visuals provide insight into the lives of Shepard's characters; metaphorically, Shepard's clever positioning of his visual images in *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, and *True West* suggests that his characters find it necessary to damage each other's securities, to destroy their own haunted pasts, or to disrupt the family experience and the myth of the perfect American family. Their lack of ability to communicate with one another leads to a physical display of emotions exhibited through the burning, tearing and smashing of personal and domestic belongings.

The destruction to the home is rooted in the Gothic tradition. Thomas P. Adler recognizes the Gothic themes in Shepard's family plays with special attention on the inescapable transgressions of the three families in Shepard's trilogy (Adler 111). However, Adler does not discuss the relationship between the family and the home. In Gothic literature, often times the family home is a direct representation of the family that lives in it as well as the past transgressions that haunt their present. Similar to the

growing fissure that runs through the Usher family home in Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic tale, "The Fall of the House of Usher," the damage done to the home in Shepard's dramas represents the dysfunction of the family living inside. The domestic structures of his set design, including the framework of the house, the door, table, refrigerator, typewriter, couch and other household items, are either destroyed or they "house" rotten or dirty props. As Kleb argues, the visuals and meaning in Shepard's plays are conjoined, which designates the destruction as a commentary on the characters in the drama. Thus, the family cannot be viewed without its connection to the home which they treat with a lack of respect by damaging it so violently.

While many critics discuss the devolution of the families in *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child* and *True West*, it seems that they tend to focus on the myth of the American West, the excessive violence, and the degenerate fathers, while overlooking the visual metaphors associated with the disintegrating relationships. It is Shepard's command of all facets of stage art that provides a deeper layer of meaning to his plays. He creates this deeper layer through his meticulous details regarding props, gestures, costumes and set design. With Shepard's command of these four aspects of stage art, he is able to develop visual metaphors to uncover aspects of the family that would stay hidden in Mamet's style of a solely dialogue driven play. The props, gestures, costumes and set design speak volumes about the damaged relationships between characters, the facades that they mask themselves with, and their class status.

In the following pages, the comprehensive use of stage directions and the assortment of visual elements strewn across the stage in Sam Shepard's family plays will be examined more closely. While the objects are sometimes odd, Shepard carefully

chooses the items he has his characters throw, burn, piss on, destroy and dirty, and the majority of the destruction is done to household objects, items usually seen as symbols of family togetherness, unity and safety. The damage done to the domestic items produces chaos on the stage and acts as a representation of the relationships among Shepard's characters, a technique that offers a visually stimulating experience for his audiences.

Chapter 1: *Curse of the Starving Class*

In *Curse of the Starving Class*, the first play in Sam Shepard's family trilogy, the set and stage directions work together to provide the audience with visual symbols of the Tate family's domestic breakdown. The structures and framework of the house and the objects within are representations of the family living inside; thus, as the often lethargic Tate family swaps feelings of entitlement over the home and their destruction of it, Shepard creates a visual commentary on the Tate family through stage directions and scene description. As the family's rejection and resigned acceptance of their sick bloodline teeter back and forth, the household is deconstructed and reconstructed multiple times, paralleling the highs and lows on the pathway to the Tate's ultimate demise. Shepard's stage directions provide meticulous gestural nuances, as well as detailed costumes and props that work to visually intensify the failing family's collapse. In his essay, "Strychnine in the Gut," Stephen J. Bottoms agrees that "the cumulative impact of the diverse impressions and images creates in audiences a sense of emotional disorientation which mirrors that felt by the characters" (Bottoms 153). It is this relationship between the images on stage and the characters' disorientation that Shepard creates in order to expose this dysfunctional family. Through the broken entrance to the home and the debris that litters the stage, Shepard creates symbols of the family's inability to nurture one another and the dark and damaging issues that lie beneath the surface of the familial relationships.

Curse of the Starving Class offers a family portrait that is riddled with destruction. Shepard's play commences in the Tate family kitchen where the disjointed family of four, symbolized by the "*four mismatched metal chairs set at each side of the*

table,” grapples with debt, bad real estate deals, alcoholism, and many family issues gone unfixed (Shepard 135). The set and props on stage that are detailed through Shepard’s stage directions create a vivid image of a family that is falling to pieces. The breakfast table that sits upstage center is “*very plain*” and the curtains are “*slightly faded*,” suggesting that the Tates’ relationships with one another are colorless, passionless, and unfruitful (Shepard 135). Also seen on stage at the opening of the drama is “*a pile of wooden debris, torn screen, etc., which are the remains of a broken door*,” and it is in this opening scene that the audience first sees Wesley cleaning up the debris of the broken door which Weston, his father, bashes in upon his return home from an alcoholic binge (Shepard 135). The pile of splintered wood serves as a visual representation of the Tate family splitting at the seams, while Wesley attempts to pick up the pieces of both the visual and metaphorical crumbling structures.

In this opening scene description Shepard uses costumes and gestures to develop his characterization of the disconnected family. Wesley is dressed in “*a sweatshirt, jeans, and cowboy boots*,” which seems like fitting work gear, as he becomes the man of the house, cleaning up after his father’s messes (Shepard 135). On the other hand, Shepard costumes Ella in a “*bathrobe, pink fuzzy slippers, and hair in curlers*,” which she wears through the majority of the first act, and which serves to demonstrate Ella’s symbolic inability to fully “awaken” herself. While the curlers signify that Ella is in transition, readying herself to escape this sick household, the pajamas reveal that she is unprepared to leave; she is confined to her dysfunctional family. The alarm clock that she “*winds*” while she “*sleepily*” watches Wesley indicates that she is in need of a wakeup call; however, this alarm does not “awaken” anyone in *Curse of the Starving*

Class (Shepard 135). Ella's "sleepiness" carries over to her curt discussion with Wesley about the events of Weston's drunken rampage. It is only "*after a while*" that Ella tells Wesley that he "shouldn't be" cleaning up the broken pieces of the front door. Their gestures, as Wesley, "*ignoring her*," methodically places the wood from the broken front door in the wheelbarrow, suggest that there is little valuable communication between mother and son (Shepard 135).

Toby Silverman Zinman writes about the importance of visuals in Shepard's world in her essay, "Visual Histrionics: Shepard's Theatre of the First Wall," which she begins by saying that "in a postmodernist theatre which is non-psychological, non-linear, hunchy, jokey, fragmented, and violent, the visuals speak much of the meaning. This is not the comforting marriage of form and content, but rather another way of addressing the audience, through the eye and not the mind" (Zinman 509). Through his stage directions, Shepard employs all forms of stage art. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, he provides his audience with dramatic images of the destruction done to the home that provide as much shock value for the audience as they do symbolism of the household and familial relationships. Early on in the drama, "*Wesley unzips his fly, takes out his pecker, and starts pissing all over [Emma's] chart on the floor*" (Shepard 142). Both Emma's costume, "*a white and green 4-H Club uniform*," and her charts on the "correct" way to cut up a chicken which she "*sets down on the table upstage and arranges*" represent a sense of order that is otherwise nonexistent in the Tate household. Therefore, when Wesley pisses on her charts, he symbolically ruins the structure that school provides for Emma. William Kleb understands this scene as an "anarchic gesture" where Wesley not only "destroys Emma's charts (her link to the social world outside the house)," but he

also “turns the kitchen into a toilet” (Kleb 6). If the destruction of the door represents disrespect for the family, then Wesley’s urination surely offers a similar disregard for the household and his sister. Kleb accurately calls Wesley’s treatment of the kitchen a “toilet,” a symbol of the “wasteland” that this family represents.

The kitchen that Wesley urinates in, where most of the action of the play occurs, is typically a place of satisfaction for many families where they can gather to metaphorically and literally quench their “thirst” or fulfill their “appetites.” In *Curse of the Starving Class* each of the characters acknowledges the empty refrigerator that sits center stage throughout the drama. Ella is “*suddenly cheerful*” at the thought of making breakfast; however, when she realizes that there is only bacon and bread, but no eggs, Shepard’s stage directions have her “*slamming refrigerator door*” (Shepard 137). Even though Ella offers to make breakfast for Wesley, he states, “I’m hungry,” after repeatedly “*opening refrigerator and staring into it*” (Shepard 143). The empty refrigerator and Ella’s breakfast suggest a fundamental absence within the family; while Ella is willing to cook breakfast for Wesley, she acknowledges that the eggs, a key ingredient for her otherwise satisfying breakfast, are missing, making Wesley’s refusal to eat his mother’s incomplete breakfast (even though he is “starving”) a commentary on the inadequate relationship that the family possesses. They do not have the ability to give each other what they crave. Later, when Ella reveals to Wesley that she is selling the house, prompting a quarrel about the upkeep of the property and Wesley’s ties to the land, she becomes hungry, even though she has just finished eating her fried bacon and bread. She “*turns to the table and stares at the plate. She picks up the plate and carries it to the stove. She stares at the stove. She turns toward refrigerator and looks at it. She crosses*

to refrigerator and opens it. She looks inside” and states, “Nothing.” (Shepard 147).

Clearly affected by the nature of the argument and the little satisfaction that selling the family home provides for her, she seems to wander around the kitchen in search of something fulfilling, and repeats this activity two more times. Bottoms agrees that these characters are “blindly filling in time by immersing themselves in mundane domestic activities,” and these repetitive activities are symbolic of “the emptiness of the Tates’ existence” (Bottoms 160). While the family may not be physically starving, they are figuratively starved of the ability to transcend the emptiness that is linked to the family’s misfortunes. Thomas P. Adler’s essay about family repetition and regression in Sam Shepard’s plays looks to the refrigerator as the ultimate emblem of dysfunction. He states,

The starvation is multilayered, not only physical and emotional, but spiritual as well; a prominent part of the stage set is a refrigerator into which one or other of the characters is often found staring, and the defeated observation of ‘Nothing’ when it is found to be empty of food conveys an almost metaphysical feeling of anguish and desperation.

(Adler 112)

While the refrigerator does not yield anything of sustenance in Act I, it seems almost therapeutic for the characters to gaze into it. The refrigerator becomes a symbol for a spiritless and inactive sense of hope as the family continuously expects a difference or change in the empty refrigerator, assuming that at some point, physical, emotional, and spiritual nourishment will be fulfilled.

However, instead of achieving fulfillment, the Tate family's devolution is amplified by Shepard's costume descriptions in Act I, as previously introduced characters change costume, and new characters are introduced. When Emma enters the stage after she attempts to flee home via horse in response to Wesley pissing on her charts, "*her white uniform*" is "*covered in mud*" (Shepard 147). While Emma is the only one in the Tate family who is orderly and clean in the beginning of Act I, the muddiness of her uniform after she is dragged by her horse suggests that even *her* faith in transcending the family curse is breaking down. In a moment of epiphany she recognizes her inconsequential existence as she fearfully reflects that she "was just a hunk of meat tied to a big animal. Being pulled" (Shepard 148). Emma is not only pulled by the horse, but she is dragged down by her own family; although she fights against it, she is linked to the fate of her relatives, and the mud on her clean uniform proves that she is part of the family's demise.

Shepard's stage directions also show a change in Ella's costume when Taylor, the realtor, appears on stage. First, Taylor enters through the mere frame of a front door, "*dressed in a smart suit, middle-aged, with a briefcase,*" an anomaly in the Tate household. Taking advantage of the Tate family in the midst of their financial woes by tricking Weston into buying useless desert land and urging Ella to sell the family property to corporate juggernauts, Taylor intrudes on the family, left vulnerable by the missing front door, and he even states, "I feel like I'm on enemy territory," as a muddied, yet tougher Emma acts as protector of her household (Shepard 150). Suspect of Taylor's relationship with her mother, Emma makes him feel uneasy while he waits to take Ella out. Taylor "*squirms nervously,*" as he waits for Ella, who finally "*enters from left in a*

dress and handbag with white gloves,” a costume that is visually inconsistent with Ella’s pajamas in the beginning of the Act. Her costume change indicates that she has finally prepared herself to leave the home, as opposed to the bathrobe and curlers from earlier in the act that connote her confinement to her family. Ella strives to put on a mask for Taylor, with whom she seems to be having an affair; however, the audience sees through her façade. Through her clothing, she attempts to use her sexuality for leverage in her financial dealings with Taylor in order to gain access to the money that she hopes could grant her the opportunity to escape her dysfunctional family.

Ella’s classy attire is juxtaposed with Weston’s; he enters the stage shoddily clad in “*a dark overcoat, which looks like it’s been slept in, a blue baseball cap, baggy pants, and tennis shoes. He’s unshaven and slightly drunk*” (Shepard 156). The sloppiness of Weston’s costume, as he enters the stage for the first time, is a visual affirmation that he is a loose block in the family’s foundation. Weston’s entrance onto the stage space reminds the audience of the broken door that he breaks down at the start of the drama. The disjointedness of the family is revealed through the symbolism of the broken door as it renders the Tates susceptible to the unsafe outside world that is threatening to dismantle the family through fraudulent property scandals that both Ella and Weston fall for. However, it is not only the outsiders that invade the house in Shepard’s drama. Although Weston owns the home, he is an intruder as he belligerently enters the house, bringing with him his woes from the external world. In “Sam Shepard’s Family Trilogy: Breaking Down Mythical Prisons,” Katherine Weiss writes, “The barrier that insulates the family from the menaces of the outside world has been battered down, and the culprit is the father, who has reversed his role as protector and now represents a threatening

intruder” (Weiss 232). As Weiss’ analysis suggests, Weston, the supposed protector of the family, allows his volatile gestures to set the tone for other destructive behavior to take place in the household. Weston and his son wrestle over their roles in the hierarchy of the household, taking turns constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing the set, each gaining a sense of empowerment as they do so.

Just before Weston enters on stage in Act One, Wesley is seen constructing a fence for his sick lamb. He “*enters from right carrying a small collapsible fence structure. He sets it up center stage to form a small rectangular enclosure.*” He exits and returns, this time “*carrying a small live lamb. He sets the lamb down inside the fenced area. He watches the lamb as it moves around inside the fence*” (Shepard 153). The fence structure and the lamb, sick with maggots, are metaphors for the family’s decline; the “collapsible” fence parallels the lack of foundation in the Tate family structures, and the lamb is representative of the sick Tate family. Positioned in the center of the stage in the family kitchen as the Tates continue to argue about Ella’s real estate deals with Taylor, the live lamb is surely meant to be the focus of the audience’s attention. The metaphors of the live prop are enhanced through dialogue when Emma asks, “Can’t you keep him outside? He’ll spread germs in here.” Wesley dismisses her by saying, “Invisible germs mysteriously floating around in the air. Anything’s a potential carrier,” implying that the family members themselves are carriers of a “disease” (Shepard 154). The Christian symbolism in which the lamb is seen as an animal of purity is reversed in Shepard’s drama, as the lamb, once pure, now has maggots, which eat away at the decaying parts of its body. Similarly, although possibly pure at one point, the “diseased” Tate family is now vulnerable to the deceptive outsiders

ready to feed on the weaknesses caused by the decay within their relationships. The sick lamb, then, is a physical symbol of the Tate family curse; the curse is contagious, passed down from generation to generation, similar to Emma's fear of the lamb's germs that could quickly spread to all of the members in the house. Responding to the plague that looms over the offspring of the Tate family, Weston tells Wesley of his own father's toxic curse when he reveals, "I saw myself infected with it. I saw me carrying it around. His poison in my body" (Shepard 167). Even Weston is aware that the children are infected with the "poison" of the bloodline, just as the lamb on stage is the "potential carrier" of the germs. Bottoms writes that in many of his plays, Shepard "presents younger generations replicating the mistakes of their elders in a cycle of self-destruction, which Wesley seems to inherit much more naturally than his sister, Emma, who makes every attempt to rid herself of her genealogical confinement," which is evident in Emma's various outbursts of frustration with her family and her desire to take the horse and leave the house (Bottoms 157).

The symbols of the Tate family's decline persist throughout the remainder of Act I through Shepard's props and set destruction as Weston adds to the debris from the door, the piss on the floor, and the sick lamb that already dirties the stage space. After crashing into the garbage cans upon returning to the house, Weston "*opens up his bag of laundry and starts taking dirty clothes out and stacking them in piles on the table*" (Shepard 158). The "dirty laundry" that families desperately try to keep secret is sitting right on the kitchen table for the audience to see. Not only does Weston dump his laundry on the table, but he also produces the only food that, for the moment, is present in the refrigerator. The artichokes, with their harsh stench and bitter taste, are characteristic of

the only type of nourishment provided for the family: that which is harsh and bitter. Wesley hungrily navigates through the refrigerator and “*looks in at [the] artichokes. He takes one out and looks at it closely, then puts it back in*” (Shepard 158). This unwillingness to eat the artichokes suggests Wesley’s reluctance to get to the “heart” of any family relationships. Perhaps it is because the exterior of the family, as well as the artichoke, is hard and each part needs to be peeled back in order to reach the tenderness.

At the opening of Act II, the audience is able to witness all the debris that has been accumulating throughout the drama. However, Wesley and Emma attempt to repair the damage that has been done to the household. Wesley is seen “*building a new door center stage. Hammers, nails, saw, and wood lying around, sawdust on floor,*” while Emma “*sits at the stage left end of the table making a new set of charts for her demonstration with magic markers and big sheets of cardboard*” (Shepard 160). Both Tate children work hard on “*fixing,*” “*measuring,*” and “*piecing together*” the ruined set and props with the tools seen on stage. Through this reconstruction of the home, the two are attempting to piece together the family that is now in danger of losing connection with one another entirely due to Ella’s interest in the sale of the home, the only structure that links the family together. Although the children reconstruct the home, and the sick lamb that represents the depth of the Tate family curse is gone, the “*dirty laundry still in piles on the table*” and the stench of boiling artichokes keep the audience aware that the children are unable to fix all of their family troubles. The house begins to look so dilapidated without a front door and with debris strewn everywhere that Emma and Wesley agree that it may turn off buyers since it “*looks like a chicken shack*” (Shepard 162).

After the Tate children spend the early part of the second act clearing the mess from the stage, both Ella and Weston deconstruct the restored household. After entering the stage drunker than before, Weston “*falls into table and collapses on it. He tries to keep himself from falling on the floor,*” in an effort to prevent the “fall” of the family (Shepard 169). In the process, he “*struggles to pull himself up on the table, knocking off dirty laundry,*” replacing the filthy laundry that has been observable on stage for quite a while with himself, but both are representations of the family curse (Shepard 169). Emma’s charts, symbolic of order and structure, are once again destroyed, as Weston pushes them off of the table to make room for himself. Soon after, Ella enters carrying food for this “starved” family. However, as she places the groceries in the refrigerator, she “*starts throwing the artichokes out onto the floor from the refrigerator,*” unwilling to put in the effort of scraping out the tender parts and symbolically reaching the “heart” of her family. Instead, she continues to deconstruct the kitchen by littering the floor, unaware that by doing so, she is undermining her children’s desire to mend the family’s dysfunction.

Following this outburst, Ella “*is silent for a while,*” her quiet response to Wesley’s sobering claims that Weston sold the house before she is able to claim her own money through Taylor, which causes her to reflect on the damage done to the household and its connection to the family curse. When Wesley states that Weston will kill both Ella and Taylor for selling the house without his knowledge, Ella finally addresses the “curse.” She states, “Do you know what this is? It’s a curse. I can feel it. It’s invisible but it’s there. It’s always there... We inherit it and pass it down, and then pass it down again. It goes on and on like that without us” (Shepard 174). The family bloodline is the

curse that is passed down from generation to generation. Soon after, wearing a “*shiny yellow shirt, open at the collar, with a gold cross on a chain hanging from his neck,*” Ellis, the owner of the Alibi Club, enters on stage immediately following Ella’s sad rant to provide Weston with the cash that he receives from selling the family home in a shady barroom deal. His flamboyant costume suggests that he is an outsider on the Tate family property, and he certainly does not care about preserving the integrity of the privately owned Western farm. The deal that Weston makes with Ellis solidifies the “curse” of the family through Weston’s neglect for his family’s future; without consideration, Weston cheapens the family worth by selling the land for such a small price, further shaming the Tate family name.

Although by the end of Act II the audience has grown accustomed to the damage and debris that is so closely associated with the inherited curse of the Tate family, the stage is reconstructed by the start of Act III. Of course, since the domestic damage is symbolic of the dysfunctional family, then the change in Weston from drunkard to fatherly protector, while superficial, is visually portrayed as a moment of calmness and cleanliness in this typically chaotic, dirtied household. The stage directions in Act III state that the “*stage is cleared of wood and tools and artichokes. Pot of fresh coffee heating on the stove. All the laundry has been washed and Weston is at the table to stage left folding it and stacking it in neat piles. He’s minus his overcoat, baseball cap, and tennis shoes and wears a fresh clean shirt, new pants, shined shoes, and has had a shave*” (Shepard 182). Replacing the harsh smell and bitter taste of artichokes is a pot of coffee, suggesting an aroma and taste that is satisfying, refreshing, and the sign of a new day. While the previous acts show the kitchen as a place that is a representation of the family’s

dissatisfaction, in the beginning of Act III, there is a sense of contentedness with coffee brewing, food in the refrigerator, no more dirty laundry, and a newly fixed door. The folded laundry suggests that order is restored to the household after the chaos that had ensued. Weiss agrees that this scene shows the family's rejuvenation. She writes, "The characters continue to try to restore virility and order to the landscape," and goes on to discuss the restoration of the wasteland represented in Act II's chaotic visual destruction (Weiss 324). The audience is able to clearly visualize the change that has been made on stage through the transformation of the set from a dirtied stage space to a clean one, which parallels Weston's sudden push to restore vitality to this disenchanted family.

The cleaned up stage of Act III parallels Weston's own transformation. He recounts his "rebirth" to Wesley as he states, "Just walked through the whole damn house in my birthday suit. Tried to get the feeling of it really being me in my own house. It was like peeling off a whole new person" (Shepard 185). Weston attempts to strip off the layers of the familial curse, delusional in his thoughts that he could abolish the internalized shame of the family. He also thinks that a change in costume will rid himself of the "curse," as he now wears "*a fresh clean shirt, new pants, shined shoes, and has had a shave*" (Shepard 182). For the moment, he is true to his altered personality when, in an odd scene for the "starving" family, he offers to cook a hearty breakfast for the always hungry Wesley. However, while he experiences his own metamorphosis, the other members of the family are not prepared to accompany him in his transformation. While he urges Wesley to "go take a bath and get that crap off your face," Wesley is not influenced by the same renewal as Weston, and it turns out that his plan for Wesley backfires (Shepard 186). Wesley returns to Weston, wearing his father's dirty clothes

that he picks out of the garbage, a visual representation that Wesley has taken on his father's identity, and a clear picture that the curse that Weston believes to have cleansed himself of has actually been peeled off and passed down to his son in the emblematic form of his clothing. Through Wesley's costume, Shepard shows that the sins of the father have been passed down. Even Ella shouts "*to Wesley*," "Weston! Was that Emma?" Wesley replies, "It's me, Mom," proving that with his father's clothing on, even his own mother does not recognize her son; by clothing himself with his father's costume, Wesley has inherited all of the negative traits that are tied to the curse (Shepard 197).

Similarly, Ella is unable to accept Weston's shift from self-loathing alcoholic to nurturing father in Act III, questioning the reconstruction of the home and accusing him of "having a nervous breakdown" (Shepard 187). Rather than continue to listen to her husband discuss his enlightened state, Ella goes to sleep on the kitchen table, as Weston had done at the end of Act II, and she "*starts pushing all the clean laundry off it onto the floor*" in order to make space (Shepard 189). By pushing the laundry onto the floor, Ella undoes the reconstruction and order of the house; her sleep at a time that Weston is trying to open up to her suggests that the damage done to the family is too deep to be fixed. Shepard shows the audience that Ella and Weston cannot be nurturing parents at the same time, and at this point, their nurturing is superficial. The order that was restored is undone as the rejuvenated household returns to Weiss' idea of the familial wasteland.

In "The American West in Shepard's Family Plays," J. Chris Westgate argues that "Weston's attempt to substantiate his rebirth – by shouting the news at his sleeping wife, who remains oblivious to his presence, much less any transcendence – suggests that his

rebirth is little more than wish-fulfillment" (Westgate 733). Even Wesley reaffirms that Weston's rebirth is merely self-deception when he enters the house with the lamb that they had saved from the maggots, which he has skinned and butchered. Even though Weston gets the lamb "back on his feet" and its purity is regained, as Weston also claims to have accomplished for himself, the hard work that he put into saving this lamb (which is all for naught) implies that even if Weston were to rid himself of the "curse," the uncertainty of the future allows for the possibility that Weston's dreams could end up being "slaughtered" regardless of his ability to transcend his past. While Shepard makes obvious Biblical allusions to the sacrificial lamb, Wesley says he slaughters the lamb because "we need some food," even though Weston's breakfast is waiting for him (Shepard 191). In his Biblical reading of the image of the butchered lamb, Adler writes, "The sacrifice was not efficacious; and what should have been a sacrament of communion became instead a grotesque gorging that did not satisfy the spiritual hunger" (Adler 117). Weiss agrees that Wesley's lamb slaughter does not aid in the family's cleansing because he butchers it out of hunger; therefore, "usurping his father, Wesley becomes the patriarch of the farm, but instead of offering renewal, he perpetuates the wasting away of the family" (Weiss 326). Although Weiss argues that it is in this scene that Wesley appropriates Weston's role of father, from the very start of the drama, Wesley seems like the man of the household. He cleans up after his father's mistakes, fixes the broken door and fights to get his father's money back, proving that he has usurped his father's position long ago.

With a sense of power, Wesley ignores his father's breakfast, and "*crosses quickly to refrigerator, opens it, and starts pulling all kinds of food out and eating it ravenously,*"

indicating that while Weston is able to satisfy his own hunger, he is unable to satisfy the hunger of the other members of his family. The sickening visual of Wesley devouring food reinforces for the audience that Wesley certainly is starved for something beyond the physical. Shepard writes that Wesley “*bends down and picks some scraps of food up off the floor and eats them very slowly. He looks at the empty lamb pen*” and “*seems dazed as he slowly chews the food*” (Shepard 195). The dirtied food eaten off the floor once again proves that there is no satisfaction in the food that Wesley consumes. None of his moments of hunger are fulfilled, and when he finally gets to feast on the food that fills the refrigerator, it is dirty. His “daze” seems to suggest his realization that he has lost the fight to keep the Tate property and in doing so has transformed into a replica of his father. As Wesley eats off the floor and Emma remarks, “Off the floor? You’ll wind up just like him. Diseased!” (Shepard 195). Shepard insinuates that the curse continues to hover over the heads of the family. Adler notes that the curse’s relationship to the family bloodline is observable through the various associations with blood throughout the drama: Wesley sheds blood in his fight for his father’s money, the lamb that is so closely connected with Weston is gruesomely slaughtered, and Emma discusses her menstrual blood earlier in the text. Adler states, “So the bloodline itself becomes a curse: the past catches up with one, the child paying for the sins of the father. The family curse extends both backward to the past and forward into the future” (Adler 113). Thus, Adler accurately declares that this family curse is inescapable, which is made clear through the overwhelming destruction of the domestic set and household props, the ultimate representation of the family itself. However, inescapable, Emma does all she can to rid herself of her family’s transgressions. Emma “*whacks Ella across the butt with the*

riding crop,” as if she is the mother punishing her disobeying daughter. Both Wesley and Emma subvert Weston and Ella’s parental roles and begin to take the place of their misguiding parents. Desperate to escape the family home and the curse that has plagued her, Emma “*throws things onto the floor from Ella’s pocket book as she searches through it*,” looking for money, but once again, littering the set that she helped to reconstruct at the start of the act, just as Wesley does with his sloppy ravaging of the food in the refrigerator.

Although Weston’s change seems charged with passion, the reactions of the family members imply that reconstructing themselves and their household after so much damage has been done is fruitless. In debt over years of botched schemes, including the purchase of the useless desert property, Weston continues to be haunted by his past transgressions, and while he is momentarily able to eliminate his debts from his own mind, Wesley brings him back to reality when he states, “It’s still there. Maybe you’ve changed, but you still owe them” (Shepard 192). While the audience certainly sympathizes with this newly sober, shaven, and well-dressed Weston, as he regretfully states, “I kept looking for it out there somewhere. And all the time it was right inside this house,” it seems too little too late for Weston to see that the family and property right under his nose are the things that make life worth living (Shepard 194). Because of the exposure of Weston’s weaknesses to the family, Wesley, in control over the household, urges Weston to run away from his house. With Weston gone and his debtors searching for him and his money, the Packard, Weston’s car, is blown up and Emerson and Slater enter into the house, “*holding out the skinned lamb carcass*,” acknowledging the last remaining prop that “looks like somebody’s afterbirth” (Shepard 198). The bloody image

of the slaughtered lamb, the symbolic afterbirth of Weston's rebirth, adds to the chaos of the disarranged props on stage. While seemingly hopeful, the bloody "afterbirth" is paraded on the stage, continuing to shame Weston in his moment of transcendence, rendering the transformation invalid. Westgate argues that Weston's "debtors, as Wesley notes, 'remember' his past and are more willing to use whatever means necessary, including blowing up his Packard and killing his daughter, to make him settle up" (Westgate 733). Though Weston momentarily escapes his debtors, leaving the family home behind does not alleviate him of the curse. He spends life on the run with the knowledge that he has infected his family and is unable to reconstruct his life.

Shepard concludes his play by reasserting the physical damage done to the house and the objects inside of it that are representative of the family, through the conversation between Emerson and Slater. As Slater looks around the house after blowing up the Packard and recognizing the slaughtered lamb as afterbirth, he states, "some mess in here, boy. I couldn't live like this if you paid me" (Shepard 198). The mess, which has accumulated again after Weston's clean up, represents the damaged family. Emerson remarks, "You let one thing slide; first thing you know you let everything slide. You let everything go downhill until you wind up in a dungheap like this" (Shepard 199). Ultimately, this is exactly how the family's dysfunction has unfolded; as the family problems build up, similar to the buildup of debris on the set, there is a downward spiral into the "dungheap" that Emerson and the audience sees. The scraps of food and the litter left on stage through to the conclusion of the play, reaffirmed by the verbal acknowledgement of it, are visual remnants of the Tate family's downward spiral that has been witnessed by the audience.

In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Sam Shepard artfully crafts the visual oddities that he has positioned on the stage. The props that are scattered throughout the set take on a life of their own as they come to represent much more than junk thrown to the floor. The debris illustrates a considerable amount about the family, primarily representing that the framework that holds the family together has been destroyed. While the set is deconstructed and reconstructed numerous times, it is the final deconstruction that shows that the Tate family has gone to pieces. Although there are not many redeeming characteristics of this family, there is some small hope that the destructive family cycle may in fact be able to be diffused at some future point. Emma signifies the voice of reason to a family that does not listen. She is able to recognize the disease that is visible on stage and determine that she does not want to continue down the same path. Adler argues that she has redeeming qualities because she is the only one who “reinvents and refashions herself” (Adler 113). Ultimately, Emma wants to run away, but she wants to be someone who could “fix anything.” She states, “I like the idea of people breaking down and I’m the only one who can help them get on the road again” (Shepard 149). The audience is left wondering if her work will start with her own family, that is, if she is not in the Packard when Weston’s debtors blow it up. While Shepard acknowledges that Emma is still part of the cursed family, he does keep Emma’s final role in the family’s future quite unclear, and with Shepard, the haziness of her role is the most hope that we are offered. The “dungheap” of the house in *Curse of the Starving Class* emphasizes the symbolism that leaves these families with a dark cloud hanging over them, and only a glimpse of hope that is, at best, miniscule.

Chapter 2 – *Buried Child*

While the destruction to the stage space ebbs and flows in *Curse of the Starving Class*, in *Buried Child*, Shepard's second play of the family trilogy, the destruction increases as does the action. It all becomes more chaotic as the three acts progress. The drama takes place in the farmlands of the Midwest, rather than the Southern California settings of both *Curse of the Starving Class* and *True West*; and it is here that Shepard's characters battle with the hidden sins that haunt the family to its demise. The transgressions of this All-American family lead to guilt and shame that often manifest as gestures. Bottoms writes, "The play is full of vivid, often provocative gestures, which an audience is bound to try to interpret as elusive but significant clues, which might fit together to provide an understanding of the family's situation" (Bottoms 174). Shepard commands these "provocative gestures," as well as the props, set design and costumes through his stage directions which contribute to the layers of metaphor and symbolism that make this drama so visually stimulating.

Throughout the drama, Shepard echoes his Midwestern setting in the many symbolic props that appear on the stage, including a variety of vegetables from the farmland in the back of the family's home. The vegetables, harvested from the family's dried out fields, are employed as a way to represent a newly established fertility amidst the family's barren landscape. Shepard intends for the focus to be on the characters' reactions to the opportunity of rejuvenation that the fertile symbols represent; Dodge and Halie, the parents of the damaged family, deny every opportunity to take these symbols as a sign of a new beginning. Instead, Shepard's characters do not eat any of the food seen on stage, proving that their spiritual malnourishment persists, just as with the Tate

family in *Curse of the Starving Class*. Many of the props are also destroyed on stage, adding to the family's "breakdown" whilst being offered salvation. Through the use of both the fertile and destroyed symbols, Shepard proves that the wounds of this family are too deep to transcend while they continue to inhabit their ancestral home, the implied location in which their transgressions were committed.

Shepard keeps the family's secrets mysterious through to the conclusion of the drama, suggesting adultery, incest and murder as possibilities for the family's wrongdoings. The haunting possibilities for the family's transgressions are accentuated by the odd props and gestures that expose a deep fracture in the family's foundations. While the fields behind the family's house have not yielded any produce for decades, Shepard has the crops grow bountifully throughout the drama, causing much of the discussion and gestures to surround the harvested vegetables. With more characters than the other dramas in the family trilogy, Shepard is able to show the profound burden that the family curse has visited on three generations, placing grandfather, father, and son on stage at the same time. The ancestral lineage of the "sins of the father" creates another layer to the dismal atmosphere of this haunting drama.

The skeletal structure of the set in *Buried Child*, with only a staircase and a couch, underscores the hollowness of the family dwelling inside the house. The "*old wooden staircase down left with a pale, frayed carpet down on the steps*" leads to Halie's bedroom. Halie spends much of the first act unseen but conversing with the characters on stage from her upstairs bedroom which acts as her own sanctuary from the family. Shepard's set design requires Halie to stay off stage when she speaks to Dodge, utilizing the structure of the set to augment the noticeable fissure that has grown in their

relationship. Shepard also positions “*an old, dark green sofa with the stuffing coming out in spots*” on the stage to symbolize a family that is worn out and coming apart at the seams (Shepard 63). While the multiple seats on the sofa would presumably allow for interaction between family members, it is only used as Dodge’s sick bed. The sofa is uninviting to the other members of the family and Dodge is the only character to settle in on the couch. Shepard’s placement of the “*faded yellow shade*” on the lamp and the “*old fashioned brown TV*” across from the couch indicate that the All-American family has lost their luster; once well-off from their plentiful crops and proud of their sons, they now harbor tremendous shame that has stolen the glow of pride and honor from the family. The large, archaic TV set, “*flickering blue*,” emits no sound or image which the family seems to imitate in their lack of communication with one another. Shepard’s stage directions also call for the sound of rain falling throughout the first two acts of *Buried Child*, adding to the ominous atmosphere of the play. The rain is both monotonous and gloomy, building tension as the characters acknowledge that “this is the only place it’s raining. All over the rest of the world it’s bright golden sunshine” (Shepard 75).

As he does in *Curse of the Starving Class*, Shepard exposes the personalities and roles of his characters in *Buried Child* through their costumes and gestures. Shepard establishes early on in the drama that the relationship between Dodge and his family is damaged. “*Thin and sickly looking*,” Dodge is covered in an “*old brown blanket*” and frequently takes swigs from the whiskey bottle that he keeps hidden under the cushions of the aging sofa (Shepard 63). Both the blanket and the bottle of whiskey are props that aid in his escape from the family members who pester him and remind him of the secrets that he desires to forget. Dodge’s blanket serves as a protection from contact with the family

members, while the whiskey offers Dodge the ability to escape when he is forced to engage with them.

Although his wife, Halie, remains off stage until halfway through the first act, the audience is immediately aware of her nagging presence. From upstairs, she interrogates Dodge about his coughing fits, even though her concern is obviously superficial; following one of Dodge's hacking coughs, she shouts, "Are you having a seizure or something! Dodge? I'm coming down there in about five minutes if you don't answer me!" (Shepard 64). Her waiting five minutes before she checks to see if her husband is dead certainly evokes humor from the audience; yet at the same time, the audience is still aware that this is a damaged relationship. Halie's relationship with her two living sons seems equally disappointing. She emasculates Bradley by designating him as useless because of his amputated leg. She goes on to demean her son, Tilden, when she shouts, "He can't look after himself anymore, so we have to do it. Nobody else will do it... I had no idea in the world that Tilden would be so much trouble. Who would've dreamed. Tilden was an All-American, don't forget" (Shepard 72). All within earshot of Tilden, Halie reveals Tilden's inadequacies and his inability to live up to the All-American athlete that he once was. Halie even compares Tilden to Ansel, her youngest son, a soldier, who died in a motel room in what Halie implies is a Mafia related death. While she memorializes and praises her dead son, she blames his marriage to a Catholic and his subsequent association with the Mafia for his death. Halie's disclosure of Tilden's flaws, in contrast to her memorialization of Ansel, gives the audience the impression that Ansel's death renders him godly in her eyes.

When Halie finally comes downstairs, she is costumed “*in black, as though in mourning. Black handbag, hat with a veil, and pulling on elbow length black gloves*” (Shepard 73). This costume suggests that Halie is grieving; her rant about Ansel, who passed away years earlier, implies that he is the cause of her grief. Her bereavement is a gesture that shows her recognition of only particular aspects of her family history; throughout the three acts, she refuses to acknowledge the family’s transgressions and praises only those who have passed. In *A Body Across the Map: The Father-Son Plays of Sam Shepard*, Michael Taav writes, “Halie is also in some sense of mourning for her living sons, Tilden and Bradley. Neither one has lived up to her hopes” (Taav 51). Her scathing criticism and demeaning gestures to both Tilden and Bradley throughout the course of the drama prove that they do not meet her expectations. She incessantly scolds her sons and offers no motherly affections to them; the results are two psychologically broken men.

Shepard juxtaposes the costumes and behaviors of Tilden and Bradley in the first act of *Buried Child*. Tilden, with his arms “*loaded with fresh ears of corn*” and wearing “*heavy construction boots, dark green work pants, a plaid shirt and a faded windbreaker*” is “*covered in mud*” from what the audience understands to be his work in the fields behind the house (Shepard 69). He is costumed as a typical farmhand, even though, as we find out soon after, the farm has not yielded any produce for many decades. In his stage directions, Shepard offers a commentary on Tilden’s mien, writing that “*something about him is profoundly burned out and displaced*” (Shepard 69). His “burned out” appearance is understandable once the audience hears Halie ranting about the disappointment that Tilden has become. On the other hand, Shepard describes

Bradley as a “big man dressed in a gray sweat shirt, black suspenders, baggy dark blue pants and black janitor’s shoes. His left leg is wooden, having been amputated above the knee. He moves with an exaggerated, almost mechanical limp” (Shepard 81). While not necessarily funereally dressed, as Halie is, Bradley’s dark costume makes his presence on the stage seem threatening. Dodge’s earlier comment that Bradley “doesn’t belong in this house,” designates him as an intruder in the family’s home (Shepard 76). Bradley and Tilden enter the stage presenting differing personalities, but both of their behaviors are unsettling. Through Tilden’s often child-like performance, Shepard suggests that Tilden’s mental capacity is below average, but it is Bradley’s deformity and cruel behavior that make him grotesque and frightening, leaving the audience fearful of what he is capable of doing.

Shepard utilizes his chief props in *Buried Child* in a similar fashion to those in *Curse of the Starving Class*. Although the Tate family has an empty refrigerator for much of *Curse*, there are moments on stage when food is cooking on the stove; however, none of the food is ingested by the family. Paralleling this first drama, even though food is scattered on stage during most of *Buried Child*, none of the characters actually consume any of it. Instead, after Tilden enters the stage carrying the corn, Dodge and Halie refuse to acknowledge its origin and insist that it is disposed of immediately. Shepard emphasizes the importance of the organic prop as a symbol in his drama by continuously juxtaposing the decades of barren fields with the newly bountiful crops through the conversations between characters. Although Tilden insists that he picked the corn “right out in back,” Dodge argues, “There hasn’t been corn out there since about nineteen thirty-five! That’s the last time I planted corn out there!” (Shepard 69). This

denial relates back to the Gothic tradition, in which the blighted family must reveal their secrets in order for the curse to be lifted and the family to regain some sense of prosperity; if the curse is not acknowledged then the family landscape will remain or become barren. While "Tilden attempts to replenish the wasteland" by bringing in the corn, neither Dodge nor Halie accept that the corn could have grown in their burned out fields, a sign that they are rejecting the opportunity to admit their sins (Weiss 330). Tilden attempts to rejuvenate the family by presenting them with the newly grown vegetables in the yard. As the argument continues about where Tilden acquires all of the corn, Tilden "*walks slowly over to Dodge and dumps all the corn on Dodge's lap and steps back*" (Shepard 70). Representing growth and renewal, Tilden's offering to Dodge implies that he is eager to break his family out of the wasteland that has consumed them for decades.

Shepard continues to show symbolically that the family's prosperity is connected to the land behind the house. Bottoms agrees that "the play suggests that the family's life has gone virtually unchanged for decades, and indeed that it is somehow bound to the land itself, tied in with the natural cycle of death and rebirth in the fields" (Bottoms 174). If the barren landscape in the backyard symbolizes the family's figurative wasteland, then the crops growing in the fields could symbolize a rebirth if the family is willing to acknowledge them. However, while Tilden is adamant that the corn comes from the family's farm, and that "[Dodge] planted it," the audience is meant to interpret the symbolism attached to Dodge's dismissive gestures regarding the corn (Shepard 71). When "*Dodge pushes all the corn off his lap onto the floor,*" he is undoing Tilden's attempt to resurrect the family. He wants no part of the vegetables that his crops produce

and does not even recognize that they could have come from his own farm. Tilden continues to urge his family towards revelation when he “*starts picking up the ears of corn one at a time and husking them. He throws the husks and silk in the center of the stage and drops the ears into the pail each time he cleans one*” (Shepard 71). Shepard cleverly chooses to use corn as his symbolic prop because of the necessary preparation to reach the edible insides. The husks need to be peeled back in order to expose the edible, nourishing part of the vegetable, just as the family secret needs to be exposed in order for the family to move forward.

Shepard’s stage directions for Dodge and Halie allow for their gestures to confirm that they are unwilling to confess their past transgressions. Halie exposes her resentment for Tilden’s desire to salvage what is left of the family when she yells, “You’re going to get kicked out of this house, Tilden. If you don’t tell me where you got that corn!” (Shepard 76). Because the corn seems to remind Halie of the secret sins of the family, she threatens to remove Tilden from the house in order to escape the emotions that it awakens. Immediately afterwards, “*Tilden starts crying softly to himself but keeps husking corn,*” proving that although he crumbles under his mother’s scoldings like a child, he continues through the family’s scathing reproach to husk the corn, symbolically getting to the heart of the family’s secrets. Halie’s biting criticism of her family persists when she irately declares Dodge “evil” after he speaks of his animosity towards their other son, Bradley. Halie links Dodge to the wasteland out back when she erupts, “You sit here day and night, festering away! Decomposing! Smelling up the house with your putrid body! Hacking your head off till all hours of the morning! Thinking up mean, evil, stupid things to say about your own flesh and blood!” (Shepard 76). Dodge’s

“decomposing” body links him to the dying crops that have been wasting away for the past few decades. Weiss writes that Dodge’s “physical state, immobilized and nearly dead, represents the wasting away of his house and farm” (Weiss 327).

Dodge’s response to Halie’s provocative comments marks the first time that the figurative link between the family and the farm is recognized by the characters on stage. Dodge shouts, “My flesh and blood’s buried in the back yard,” followed by a “*long pause*” (Shepard 77). The mysteriousness of this statement, followed by a long, yet ambiguous conversation about the sensitivity of this subject, adds to the ominous atmosphere of the drama. Finally, after Dodge frantically yells, “I don’t want to talk,” Tilden replies, “Well, you gotta talk or you’ll die... I found that out in New Mexico. I thought I was dying but I just lost my voice” (Shepard 78). Through this statement, Shepard indicates that without admitting the family secrets, the family is destined to crumble. Tilden exits the stage to go back to the farm in the backyard as Dodge “*coughs violently, throws himself back against the sofa, and clutches his throat*” (Shepard 79). Dodge’s coughing fit evokes the urgency of Tilden’s message; his choking cough is symbolic of the “lost voice” that Tilden warns him against. Without voicing his sins, Dodge and his family are destined to perish. It is only after Tilden returns to help him that Dodge is able to relax, confirming Tilden’s role as rejuvenator of the family.

Shepard’s highly symbolic gestures regarding the crops remain in focus at the conclusion of the first act when Tilden “*gently spreads the corn husks over the whole length of Dodge’s body... He gathers more husks and repeats the procedure until the floor is clean of corn husks and Dodge is completely covered in them except for his head*” (Shepard 81). Some critics read this scene as Tilden’s ritualistic burial of Dodge

(Bottoms 178). In this reading, Tilden is “burying” his father to make room for a new patriarch of the family. Vince’s arrival in the subsequent act could prove this mythical reading of the burial valid since he eventually inherits the home. On the other hand, Weiss argues,

Shepard’s stage directions reveal that Tilden leaves Dodge’s head uncovered and his spreading of the husks is gently executed. Tilden’s action resembles that of a parent covering a child with a blanket rather than a burial; he takes on the role of nurturer, covering Dodge in nature’s vegetation, striving to rejuvenate the family patriarch. This action, though, proves futile. (Weiss 330)

Because Dodge throws his material blanket off of himself in the middle of the act, leaving himself vulnerable, Tilden blankets him with the corn husks as a way of offering protection to his father. Thus, Weiss is correct in her assertion that Tilden’s action seems more nurturing than funereal. However, this nurturing protection does “prove futile” because of Bradley’s entrance immediately following Tilden’s gesture.

Bradley’s violent response to the props spread across Dodge’s body exposes his volatile personality. This character trait is established earlier in the act when Halie insists that “Bradley’s going to be very upset when he sees [the corn husks on the ground]. He doesn’t like to see the house in disarray. He can’t stand it when one thing is out of place. The slightest thing. You know how he gets” (Shepard 76). Shepard emphasizes Bradley’s need for control when he gives Dodge a haircut at the conclusion of the first act. Angered immediately upon entering the stage space, Bradley “*violently knocks away some of the corn husks then jerks off Dodge’s baseball cap and throws it down center*

stage” (Shepard 82). Not only does Bradley undo Tilden’s protective covering of the corn husks over Dodge’s body, but he also emasculates Dodge by removing his baseball cap and cutting “*Dodge’s hair while he sleeps.*” The cap is an important prop for Dodge that symbolizes security, designating Bradley’s removal of it as both controlling and humiliating. The power that Bradley displays over his father at the conclusion of Act I differentiates him from Tilden, who is both soft and nurturing in his attempt to protect his father with the corn husks. Shepard juxtaposes the two brothers as both of their final gestures on stage in Act I are performed upon a sleeping, vulnerable Dodge; their actions prove the differences in their personalities.

At the start of the second act, Shepard’s stage directions reveal that “*all of the corn and husks, pail and milking stool have been cleared away,*” leaving the stage clean, as the audience first saw it at the start of the drama (Shepard 83). Shepard immediately directs the audience’s attention towards the structure of the screen door that acts as the entrance to the family’s home. With only a screen door protecting the family from outsiders, it seems fitting that Dodge’s grandson, Vince and his girlfriend Shelly, enter into the home without being invited inside. Outside of the house, Shelly finds the All-American household that Vince’s family inhabits humorous. Shelly’s declaration that the house looks like “a Norman Rockwell cover or something” infuriates Vince who replies, “What’s a’ matter with that? It’s American” (Shepard 83). Shepard cleverly utilizes Shelly’s big city notions of “small town U.S.A.” to make the audience aware of the façade of Dodge and Halie’s home. Referencing the *Dick and Jane* children’s books, Shelly continues to mock the house as she questions, “Where’s the milkman and the little dog? What’s the little dog’s name? Spot. Spot and Jane. Dick and Jane and Spot,”

while she *"laughs so hard she falls to her knees holding her stomach. Vince stands there looking at her"* (Shepard 83, 84). Just as Dick and Jane represent a false sense of perfection in the American lifestyle, the exterior of the family's home is just a veneer for what is housed inside. Not only is Vince offended by Shelly's insults, but he is also frustrated with her unsympathetic tone as they are about to see his family that he has been estranged from for six years. While Shelly continues to disrespect Vince's traditional, ancestral home through her mocking laughter and observations, she does keep the audience and characters grounded in the "real world" by remarking on and exposing the often abnormal behavior of Vince and his family members.

Shepard appropriately costumes Shelly and Vince in clothing that exhibits their roles in the drama. Shelly is *"about nineteen, black hair, very beautiful. She wears tight jeans, high heels, purple T-shirt and a short rabbit fur coat. Her makeup is exaggerated and her hair has been curled"* (Shepard 83). Her hip, trendy clothing renders her an outsider among this Midwestern family. With makeup, rabbit fur, and high heels, Shelly's flamboyant style seems out of place in a small, country town. On the other hand, Shepard costumes Vince in a fashion similar to his father, Tilden. Vince is *"about twenty-two, wears a plaid shirt, jeans, dark glasses and cowboy boots,"* which is nearly identical to Tilden's outfit. This purposeful costuming allows for the interchangeability of the two in both Halie and Dodge's eyes later on in the drama.

Shepard utilizes Dodge's signature prop, his baseball cap, to display his vulnerability after Bradley cuts his hair and Shelly enters uninvited into his home. While Vince heads upstairs to search for his grandparents, Shelly notices Dodge on the sofa, *"his hair cut extremely short and in places the scalp is cut and bleeding. His cap is still*

center stage” (Shepard 83). The cuts on Dodge’s scalp confirm the reasoning behind his declaration in the first act that “if [Bradley] shows up here with these clippers, I’ll kill him!” (Shepard 67). Bradley’s haircut is violent and Shepard is sure to make the result of the violence a visual image of which the audience is aware. Shelly immediately notices Dodge’s baseball cap in the middle of the room and she “*picks it up and puts it on her head*” (Shepard 86). Coinciding with her earlier jests, Shelly’s gesture continues to illustrate her contempt for the family’s American Dream household and her disrespect of everything housed inside. Shelly’s placement of the cap on her head might also be linked to the uneasiness that she attempts to hide with her sardonic comments. In this case, the prop fulfills the same purpose as it does for Dodge; it acts as a form of protection and security for both characters. Without his cap on, Dodge becomes a victim to outsiders, and as Shelly takes the cap off, she becomes an outsider again. She “*crosses over to Dodge slowly and stands next to him. She stands at his head, reaches out slowly and touches one of his cuts,*” forcing Dodge to “*jerk up to a sitting position on the sofa, eyes open*” (Shepard 86). When Shelly awakens Dodge and forces him to recognize the cuts on his head, he “*sees his cap in her hands, [and] quickly puts his hand to his bare head. He glares at Shelly then whips the cap out of her hands and puts it on,*” immediately escaping back to his guarded front (Shepard 86).

Vince’s arrival causes chaos and confusion for the family. The confusion is mirrored by the increasing violence and destruction to the props in the second half of the drama. Both Dodge and Halie do not recognize their grandson; the audience is left to wonder if their inability to identify him is fabricated or if their subconscious minds force them to escape from whatever haunting memories Vince brings with his arrival. As

Vince and Shelly make their presence known to Dodge, Vince is shocked that “*Dodge looks up at him, not recognizing him*” (Shepard 87). Even after Vince explains that he is Tilden’s son, Dodge responds, “You didn’t do what you told me. You didn’t stay here with me,” confusing Vince with his father, Tilden (Shepard 87). This is the first of a long series of moments throughout *Buried Child* where the characters on stage have difficulty recognizing one another. The struggle to identify becomes more easily explained after Dodge responds to Vince’s declaration that he “[doesn’t] know anything that’s happened” by insisting, “Well, that’s good. That’s good. It’s much better not to know anything. Much, much better” (Shepard 88). The audience can easily equate the comfort Dodge finds in “not knowing anything” with his earlier declaration, “I don’t want to talk,” which follows a mysterious reference to the family secret. Dodge is desperate to shelter himself from anyone that might make him vulnerable to the haunting past that he is attempting to escape. The inability to recognize Vince, then, makes it easier for Dodge to distance himself from the transgressions of the family that remain unknown to the audience.

In an effort to deaden the memories of his past, Dodge searches for his bottle of whiskey by “*tearing the cushions off*” the sofa and “*throwing them downstage*” (Shepard 91). Shepard displays the incongruity of the family when he shows the cushions out of place and scattered on the floor. Dodge’s gestures and the torn apart sofa reflect the family’s own disjointedness as a result of Tilden’s harvest and Vince’s arrival, both catalysts for Dodge’s fear of revisiting the past. Shepard furthers the symbolism when “*Dodge keeps ripping away at the sofa looking for his bottle, he knocks over the night stand with the bottles. Vince and Shelly watch as he starts ripping the stuffing out of the*

sofa" (Shepard 91). Dodge's destruction to the sofa parallels the split in the fallen family. Desperate to find the whiskey bottle that numbs his mind, Dodge even pulls out the insides of the sofa, just as he is pulling apart the core of the family by refusing to confess his sins.

Shepard incorporates gestures that expose the characters' uneasiness when faced with the inability to recognize or be recognized. When Vince's father, Tilden, does not recognize his own son, he merely "*stares at Vince*" then states, "I had a son once but we buried him" (Shepard 92). Dodge furiously argues that the burial happened before Tilden was born, but when Dodge "*wraps himself up in the blanket and sits on the sofa staring at the floor,*" it seems that he is not only eager to hide himself in the cocoon of his protective blanket, but he is also trying to hide a secret. Desperate to make his father and grandfather remember him, Vince attempts to do tricks that might help to trigger their memory. He "*bends a thumb behind his knuckles for Dodge,*" "*curls his lips back and starts drumming on his teeth with his fingernails making little tapping sounds,*" and finally he "*pulls his shirt out of his belt and holds it tucked under his chin with his stomach exposed. He grabs the flesh on either side of his belly button and pushes it in and out to make it look like a mouth talking. He watches his belly button and makes a deep sounding cartoon voice to synchronize with the movement*" (Shepard 95). While certainly humorous for the audience, Vince's frantic attempts to be identified are sadly desperate. All of Vince's gestures prove futile and Shelly scorns his infantile behavior when she disgustedly states, "Vince, don't be pathetic, will ya!" (Shepard 96). Unwilling to accept that his family does not recognize him even though he tries to entertain them with all of the quirky gestures that he associates with his youth, Vince shouts, "Am I in a

time warp or something?” “How could they not recognize me! How in the hell could they not recognize me! I’m their son!” (Shepard 97). What Vince does not understand is that the family members are unable to identify anything that is associated with their sin.

As the characters struggle to identify one another in Act II, Shepard revisits the symbolic crops when Tilden enters the stage, “*this time [with] his arms full of carrots*” (Shepard 91). In the midst of Dodge’s retreat beneath the blanket and Vince’s desperate attempts to be identified by Tilden, Shelly is the only character who compassionately acknowledges the props that Tilden carries. She simply asks, “Do you want me to take those carrots for you?” (Shepard 93). Tilden “*stares at her arms*” then tenderly “*dumps the carrots*” into them (Shepard 93). While the crops are different from the corn that Tilden first brings to the stage, they still represent the resurrection of the family secrets. It is easy for Shelly, who is not part of the family, to receive the crops from Tilden because she is innocent of the transgressions that Tilden is attempting to unearth with the emblematic crops. He states, “Back yard’s full of carrots. Corn. Potatoes,” acknowledging that there are even more crops than what the audience sees on stage (Shepard 93). While Shelly holds the carrots, Vince quickly becomes associated with Dodge and Halie’s desire to absolve themselves of the symbolism of the crops when he yells to Shelly, “Put the carrots down!” and “*tries to knock the carrots out of her arms*” (Shepard 94). While Tilden is in back retrieving a milking stool for Shelly to sit on while she peels the carrots, Shelly acts as the protector of the carrots, turning away from Vince each time he comes near them. As soon as Tilden enters the stage with the milking stool, Shelly “*sets the carrots on the floor and takes the knife from Tilden. She looks at Vince again then picks up a carrot, cuts the ends off, scrapes it and drops it in the pail. She*

repeats this, Vince glares at her. She smiles" (Shepard 94). Shepard chooses long, narrow, phallic shapes for the vegetables that have sprouted in the field behind the house; these symbols are in contrast to the sterile landscape that has plagued the family for generations. The phallic symbolism of the props is enhanced when Shelly scrapes the carrots with a knife while looking at Vince, emasculating him and leaving him powerless in forcing her to stop.

As Shelly continues to peel the carrots, Tilden "*watches Shelly's hands as she keeps cutting,*" but it is Tilden's gestures at this point in the drama that are so provocative (Shepard 98). His reaction to the fur coat the Shelly is costumed in is both disturbing and child-like. Tilden "*moves around in front of her as she continues with the carrots... he moves around behind her... keeps moving around her slowly in a circle... He stares at her hair and coat*" (Shepard 100-1). Like a predatory animal, Tilden stalks Shelly as he obsessively stares at her fur coat. Finally, after Tilden "*very slowly touches the fur on her arm then pulls back his hand again,*" Shelly "*takes off her coat and hands it to Tilden. Tilden takes it slowly, feels the fur then puts it on. Shelly watches as Tilden strokes the fur slowly,*" echoing Lenny's simplistic desire to touch soft objects in *Of Mice and Men* (Shepard 102). Since Shelly is an outsider, yet feels comfortable in the house, it can be presumed that the fur coat is another prop that acts as a protection from the odd behavior of the characters in the home. When Shelly allows Tilden to wear the coat, she is handing off that protective layering to Tilden. This is the point where he feels most comfortable divulging some of the information regarding the family's transgressions. He tells Shelly, "We had a baby. (*motioning to Dodge*) He did. Dodge did. Could pick it up with one hand. Put it in the other. Little baby. Dodge killed it... Dodge drowned it...

He's the only one who knows where it's buried. The only one. Like a secret buried treasure" (Shepard 103-4). Shepard allows for more information about the family's hidden sins to be revealed at this point, although it only adds to the mystery of this fallen family. As Tilden discloses this information, "*Dodge struggles to walk toward him and falls,*" which represents the "fall" of the family's patriarch as their sins are revealed (Shepard 104). Immediately upon finishing his story, Tilden "*slowly takes Shelly's coat off and holds it out to her*"; by shedding the coat, Tilden reaffirms that the coat is used for protection and is only needed when he tells his story to Shelly.

Although Tilden gives the coat back to Shelly, she does not put it on which renders her unprotected in the final moments of Act II. When Bradley appears on stage, he sees Shelly's coat in Tilden's hands and he "*grabs it away from him,*" suggesting that Bradley is now in control of the stage space (Shepard 105). Left alone on stage, Shelly is faced with a power hungry Bradley. He taunts Shelly through his dominating body language and by frighteningly asking, "You're scared too, right?" (Shepard 106). "*Clenching the coat in his fist,*" Bradley forces Shelly to "open [her] mouth." He "*puts his fingers into her mouth*" and yells at her to "just stay put," violating her body in what seems quite like a rape. While the rape illuminates the need for Bradley to dominate the powerful outsider, it only adds to the transgressions that have torn the family apart. Shepard concludes the act with Bradley dropping "*the coat so that it lands on Dodge and covers his head,*" protecting Dodge from seeing what Bradley is doing and giving Dodge the sense of protection that Shelly could have used in these final disturbing moments of the second act (Shepard 106).

Following the unsettling figurative rape scene that closes the second act, Act III commences with “*bright sun. No sounds of rain,*” and a “*cleared up*” stage (Shepard 108). For the first time, the rain has ceased allowing for Shepard to manipulate his audience into believing that there is an “implicit promise that the truth will eventually be revealed” by the conclusion of the drama (Bottoms173). Along with the newly lighted set, Halie’s changed costume also seems to have a lighthearted feel. She is wearing a “*bright yellow dress, no hat, white gloves and her arms are full of yellow roses*” (Shepard 113). These yellows that adorn her costume are reminiscent of the sun shining into the family’s living room. However, with Bradley asleep under Dodge’s blanket and Shelly’s coat covering Dodge, the audience is reminded of Bradley’s grotesque behavior in the final scenes of Act II.

Shepard continues to utilize food as the primary prop that showcases the family’s denial of a spiritual resurrection. Even though Dodge earlier refuses to acknowledge the origin of the vegetables, Tilden never actually offers them to be eaten. However, when Shelly enters the stage “*balancing a steaming cup of broth in a saucer*” for Dodge, his blatant refusal of nourishment proves that he does not wish to heal his figurative wounds (Shepard 113). As the patriarch of the family, his unwillingness to get back to a healthy state implies that the family’s health will continue to decline. Even though the crops and the broth are healthy, nourishing props, if they are not consumed, the family will not receive the nutrition; Dodge’s denial of being nursed back to health by Shelly proves that this family refuses all opportunity of rejuvenation. While Shelly attempts to act as a catalyst for Dodge and the family to be nurtured back to health, her gesture fails to create a difference.

Shelly acts as a police officer firing question after question at Dodge after he refuses the broth. She proves that she is not fearful of cultivating discussion of the family secrets that the majority of the characters seem so desperate to forget. Shelly inquires why Dodge never views the photographs that are hanging on the walls upstairs to which he responds, "That isn't me! That never was me!" (Shepard 111). Shelly challenges Dodge by asking, "so the past never happened as far as you're concerned?" (Shepard 111). Although Dodge attempts to forget the past, his repressed memories continue to haunt him. In his book, *Dis/Figuring Sam Shepard*, Johan Callens emphasizes the importance of the family's timely exposure of themselves as transgressors. He writes, "The family's early confession of its crime would have entailed a punishment administered by the outside world but that might have been better than becoming one's own judge and executioner" (Callens 54). As a result of the family's disconnection and their inability to recognize any part of the past, the family is stuck in limbo; they are haunted by the past, but fearful of the future. Dodge's need to be either protected by the blanket or numbed by his whiskey drinking verifies that he is incessantly trying to escape the persistent distress caused by the sins that plague him. Shelly, like the audience, recognizes the dysfunction in this home when she asks the question that drives the audiences' fascination with the characters in the drama: "What's happened to this family anyway?" (Shepard 112).

Halie's dialogue and presence on stage prove to emasculate both Dodge and Bradley so much that they are fearful of her arrival with Father Dewis. Dodge uses Shelly's coat as protection from them as he "*pulls the rabbit fur coat over his head and hides,*" while also insisting that Shelly stay with him (Shepard 113). Oblivious to any

other people in the house, Halie enters to see Bradley's wooden leg leaning against the sofa and Dodge hiding under a fur coat and is embarrassed. While Dodge is the character who is most fearful of Halie's entrance onto the stage space, Bradley feels the heaviest impact of Halie's fury. She takes away Bradley's security when she "*whips the blanket off Bradley and throws it on Dodge*" (Shepard 115). Regaining his protective covering, "*Dodge covers his head again with the blanket*" and for the majority of the final act, Dodge stays guarded under his blanket. Halie yells at Bradley for declaring the blanket his own and in response to Halie's anger, he "*slowly recoils, lies back down on sofa, turns his back toward Halie and whimpers softly,*" acting just as Tilden does earlier in the drama after being scolded by his mother (Shepard 115). Even though Bradley puts on a strong persona, he crumbles under his mother's dominance.

The yellow roses that Shepard has Father Dewis carry onto the stage act as another important prop in the drama. When Halie acknowledges that "we can't shake certain basic things. We might end up crazy. Like my husband. You could see it in his eyes. You could see how mad he is," her gestures indicate that while she can understand how the hidden sins have affected Dodge, she does not necessarily think that he should confess them. Halie "*takes a single rose from Dewis and moves slowly over to Dodge,*" then she "*throws the rose gently onto Dodge's blanket. It lands between his knees and stays there. Long pause as Halie stares at the rose. Shelly stands suddenly. Halie doesn't turn to her but keeps staring at the rose*" (Shepard 118). The yellow rose, which stands for jealousy and dying love, indicates that Halie is marking the end of their love for one another; at this point, her giddy interactions with Father Dewis come clearly into view as signs of a freshly new love affair. In this funereal scene Halie is eulogizing

Dodge, even though he is lying on the couch under his protective blanket. The flower that she tosses between his knees parallels the funeral traditions of tossing roses on a casket in memory of the dead.

In the final climactic scenes of Act III, Shepard challenges his actors with the task of employing multiple props at once as complete chaos erupts on the stage. Shepard makes demands of his characters to destroy props in these closing scenes including the saucer and Vince's empty beer bottles. Each of these symbols advances the characters' need to control one another and conceal the family's sins. Shelly is first to start smashing glass all over the stage after Halie threatens her. Shelly moves violently towards her and *"suddenly throws the cup and saucer against the stage right door. The cup and saucer smash into pieces"* (Shepard 119). The destruction of the cup and saucer provide Shelly with the voice and power that she has been trying to gain for the majority of the third act. When all eyes turn to Shelly and everyone in the house stops fighting, it is clear that she has achieved what she wants. She gains even more control over Bradley when she *"suddenly grabs her coat off the wooden leg and takes both the leg and coat down stage, away from Bradley. Bradley reaches pathetically in the air for his leg. [He] keeps making whimpering sounds"* (Shepard 120). The fake leg is another phallic symbol that represents the sterility of the family; Shelly emasculates Bradley when she moves his leg away from him, rendering him powerless. These empowering gestures allow her to get back to being the interrogator that she was at the beginning of the act. She finally acknowledges what is at the source of the family's inability to communicate. She says, "I know you've got a secret. You've all got a secret. It's so secret in fact, you're all convinced it never happened" (Shepard 122). Although Dodge replies, "She thinks she's

gonna suddenly bring everything out into the open after all these years,” and Halie is in a panic about the revelation, saying, “If you tell this, you’ll be dead to me,” Shelly’s investigation is successful; Dodge does finally reveal the secret, although to the disappointment of his audience, his confession is vague and indirect. Dodge implies that the baby was born out of an incestuous relationship between Tilden and Halie; shamed and fearful of society’s judgments, Dodge confesses, “I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of a litter. Just drowned it” (Shepard 124). However as Bottoms notes, “It is impossible to assemble the various references to the child into any coherent narrative that might explain what ‘actually’ happened” (Bottoms 177).

The destruction to the stage reaches its peak when, immediately following Dodge’s revelation, Vince comes “*crashing through the screen porch door up left, tearing it off its hinges*, rendering those inside vulnerable to outsider intruders, as is shown in *Curse of the Starving Class* when Weston breaks down the family’s front door. With a “*paper shopping bag full of empty booze bottles*, Vince “*sings and smashes them at the opposite end of the porch*” (Shepard 125). Shepard demands that “*this should be an actual smashing of bottles and not [a]tape sound*,” creating a much more realistic destruction to the set. Shelly, the grounding force in the drama, pushes the characters on stage to complete their revelation of the family secrets; however, she has trouble pulling the drunken Vince back to reality.

She desperately attempts to speak to him, but as “*Vince pushes his face against the screen from the porch and stares at everyone*,” it is Vince who has trouble recognizing his family members inside (Shepard 125). When Bradley attempts to reach out of the screened-in porch for Vince, Vince “*strikes out at Bradley’s hand with a*

bottle,” and he will not let Shelly leave the house, implying that Vince is holding his family members hostage. Vince shouts, “Off limits! Verboten! This is taboo territory. No man or woman has ever crossed the line and lived to tell the tale” (Shepard 127). It seems, then, that Vince is actually keeping his family from the outside world, locking the secret inside of the household. Callens discusses the screened in porch as a liminal state:

The porch functions in this case as the liminal zone between inside and outside, between sacred and profane. It is screened-in for practical purposes, to prevent glass slivers from spilling onto the acting area (when Vince smashes some empty bottles against the porch’s sidewall), but it is also an area of physical violence bridging to the verbal and symbolic violence occurring inside. (Callens 53)

It seems then that when Vince “*jabs the blade*” of the folded hunting knife “*into the screen and starts cutting a hole big enough to climb through,*” he is bringing the profane world inside of the home, distracting the family from Dodge’s confession.

When Vince finally enters the house, the audience is informed that Dodge has bequeathed the house to Vince as he “*proclaims his last will and testament*” (Shepard 128). It is then that Vince “*strides slowly around the space, inspecting his inheritance... He picks up the roses,*” and after explaining to Shelly that he is staying because he “just inherited a house,” she bids farewell to him, as he holds the roses that stand for dying love (Shepard 128, 129). While Dodge is able to peacefully pass on because of the revelation of the family’s incestuous relationships, Vince recognizes, “I’ve gotta carry on the line. I’ve gotta see to it that things keep rolling,” which implies that Vince will take on the role of the new patriarch in the house.

However, Vince's inability to recognize the family implies that he has not been cleared of the transgressions that he has now inherited. In a final gesture from Vince after Dodge dies, he "*places the roses on Dodge's chest then lays down on the sofa, arms folded behind his head, staring at the ceiling. His body is in the same relationship to Dodge's,*" indicating that he has not only given Dodge a symbolic burial, placing the rose on his chest, but the positioning of his body indicates that he has taken over the patriarchal role in the family (Shepard 131). Adler reads this final scene as a "sacrificial death," allowing for the new generation to take over the ruling of the home. However, Adler argues that Vince is "as impotent and unable to bring renewal" as Dodge (Adler 118). If Adler is correct in his statement, then Vince's arrival into the family will not elicit any form of change from these characters. Although Halie finally recognizes the crops outside at the conclusion of the drama when she states, "Tilden was right about the corn you know. Carrots too. Potatoes. Peas. It's like a paradise out there, Dodge. You oughta' take a look. A miracle. I've never seen it like this. Maybe the rain did something. Maybe it was the rain," the fact that she does not recognize that her own husband is dead suggests that she is still oblivious to the realities that could connect her back with the outside world that the family has shunned (Shepard 131-2). While the acknowledgement of the family's sins allows the fields to become fertile, it is Dodge's partial confession and Halie's neglect of Dodge's death that imply that the bounty will not save the family.

Shepard concludes his drama with his morbid final prop: the dead corpse that Tilden carries in from the fields. In his stage directions Shepard writes,

Tilden appears from stage left, dripping with mud from the knees down. His arms and hands are covered with mud. In his hands he carries the corpse of a small child at chest level, staring down at it. The corpse mainly consists of bones wrapped in muddy, rotten cloth. He moves slowly downstage toward the staircase, ignoring Vince on the sofa. Vince keeps staring at the ceiling as though Tilden wasn't there. (Shepard 132)

Metaphorically, the resurrection of the child represents the unearthing of the secret that has been haunting the family. This final scene creates a visually tangible image of the secret that has been alluded to for the entirety of the drama. While the secret is unearthed and the crops seem to be furiously growing, Adler argues that “the remains of the buried son have literally fertilized the earth in a grimly Gothic manner” (Adler 119). His assertion that all of the images that seem to represent the renewal of the family should be considered ironic is accurate. While Tilden and Dodge acknowledge the family secrets, Vince, who was not present on stage for the revelation, merely stares at the ceiling while Tilden carries in the physical representation of the “secret.” Even Halie is too infatuated with the growing crops outside to notice the resurrected child or the death of her husband. Both of these gestures promise that Halie and Vince will continue the dark cycle of repression that Vince has inherited from Dodge. Ultimately, although the crops grow and the secret is unearthed, Shepard leaves the audience with an equally dark atmosphere at the conclusion of the drama to the one with which he begins.

Chapter 3: *True West*

Set in a Southern California kitchen, *True West* provides a much more realistic set design than either of the first two plays in Sam Shepard's family trilogy. Before the action in *True West* takes place, Sam Shepard provides comprehensive stage directions, stressing the importance of the props, costumes and set design to the development of the characters and the storyline, while warning that any theatrical alterations to set design will severely change the authenticity of the play. In his "Note on Set and Costume," Shepard writes,

The set should be constructed realistically with no attempt to distort its dimensions, shapes, objects, or colors. No objects should be introduced which might draw special attention to themselves other than the props demanded by the script. If a stylistic 'concept' is grafted onto the set design it will only serve to confuse the evolution of the characters' situation, which is the most important focus of the play. Likewise, the costumes should be exactly representative of who the characters are and not added onto for the sake of making a point to the audience. (Shepard 3-4)

With the script "demanding" such specific set construction and costumes, Shepard stresses that the props, costumes and furniture on the stage aid in the development of character and conflict. Brothers Austin and Lee dominate the stage space as they violently and destructively use the set and props to communicate their anger and advance their seesawing status over one another. This sibling rivalry, rooted in their contradicting personalities and contention for parental approval, results in an inability to communicate,

reducing their behavior to violence and destruction as a means of revealing their jealousies and their opposing personalities. Since the characters' attempts at successful verbal communication fail, Shepard allows for the props to act as a visual reminder of this anger between the brothers. As the props on the stage are broken, burned and thrown, the accumulation of debris leads to what Shepard calls a "desert junkyard," and ultimately this family relationship is indeed as barren as the desert.

Shepard opens his comprehensive stage directions with meticulous and very specific descriptions of the costumes worn by the four main players in the drama. Austin is in his "*early thirties, light blue sports shirt, light tan cardigan sweater, clean blue jeans,*" and "*white tennis shoes*" (Shepard 2). His "clean" jeans and the "light" blue, white, and tan colors of his costume suggest his bourgeois, clean cut status; Austin is a portrait of the American Dream. Lee, on the other hand, is in his "*early forties, filthy, white t-shirt, tattered brown overcoat with dust, dark blue baggy suit pants from the Salvation Army, pink suede belt, pointed black forties dress shoes scuffed up, holes in the soles, no socks, no hat, long pronounced sideburns, 'Gene Vincent' hairdo, two days' growth of beard, bad teeth*" (Shepard 2). Lee's costume that neither fits properly nor matches is "tattered" and "dusty," worn-in much more than Austin's tight, stiff clothing. Lee's clothing seems "lived in," and his hairstyle, similar to that of rock and roll pioneer Gene Vincent, suggests that Lee is untamed and wild. These juxtaposed costumes serve to expose the brothers as visual opposites; while Austin is tailored, conservative and preppy, Lee's shoddy costume makes him look much less refined than his younger brother.

While the first two plays in the family trilogy begin with damage done prior to the opening of the drama (the door is already broken down in *Curse of the Starving Class*, and the crops have died in *Buried Child*), *True West* commences with a pristine set. All nine scenes take place in Austin and Lee's childhood kitchen, and the set is a generic suburban home with "a sink, upstage center, surrounded by counter space, a wall telephone, cupboards, and a small window just above it bordered by neat yellow curtains... stove and refrigerator" (Shepard 3). In the alcove attached to the kitchen is a "small round glass breakfast table mounted on white iron legs, two matching white iron chairs set across from each other" and "many small windows" that look out to "bushes and citrus trees" (Shepard 3). The uniformity and neatness of the furniture that differs greatly from the mismatched metal chairs in the kitchen of *Curse of the Starving Class* suggests that this is a tidy, well-kept home. However, even though there are "house plants in various pots, mostly Boston ferns hanging in planters at different levels" that seem to represent growth and vitality, the "green synthetic grass" on the floor of the alcove implies that the suburban perfection is a mere fabrication. Megan Williams, author of "Nowhere Man and the Twentieth-Century Cowboy: Images of Identity and American History in Sam Shepard's *True West*," discusses the superficiality that this synthetic grass represents: "While the living plants at the back of the stage initially seem to create *True West* as a type of edenic reprisal of Lee and Austin's familial origins, the 'green synthetic grass' on the floor negates any promise of history and of a stable concept of identity that *True West* proffers" (Williams 62). Williams is correct in her assertion that without a redeeming history for these characters to uncover, theirs is a futile quest for identity. Although the brothers' often circular conversations about their

familial relationships indicate that Lee and Austin subconsciously want to discover some vehicle for making sense of their histories, the instability of the family offers nothing in return. Even their understanding of their father/son relationships and their perception of their familial origins are superficial and reductive; neither of the two brothers is able to establish identity and they merely swap the very little sense of self they have with one another as the play develops

This transference of identity becomes apparent well into the drama, but at first Lee and Austin seem to represent polarities of identity as Shepard introduces them to the audience; Lee is a conman with an unstructured, wild side to his character, while Austin is a screenwriter, very clearly attempting to fulfill the American Dream with a wife and children at home in the mountains of Northern California. The initial scene juxtaposes the brothers as Austin is described as “*seated at glass table hunched over a writing notebook, pen in hand, cigarette burning in ashtray, cup of coffee, typewriter on table, stacks of paper, candle burning on table*” (Shepard 5). Conversely, Lee has a “*beer in hand, six-pack on the counter behind him. He’s leaning against the sink, mildly drunk; takes a slug of beer*” (Shepard 5). The refined, hardworking nature of Austin positioned next to Lee’s uncultivated temperament depicts the extremes that these two brothers represent. However, although shoddily clad and mildly drunk, it is Lee who initially seems to insist on the cleanliness and order of the home while their mother is away vacationing in Alaska. He asks Austin, “You keepin’ the plants watered... Keepin’ the sink clean? She don’t like even a single tea leaf in the sink, ya’ know,” while Austin “*trying to concentrate on writing,*” dismissively responds with “Yeah, I know” (Shepard 5). While Lee is certainly patronizing his younger brother in exhorting him to follow

Mom's rules, the way older brothers do, the subtext of this nagging suggests that Lee is jealous that Mom chooses her responsible, hardworking, upper middle class son to watch the house instead of him. He even childishly insists that "she might've just as easily asked me to take care of her place as you... I mean I know how to water plants" (Shepard 7). This desire to be viewed favorably by both mom and dad seems to dictate many of the brothers' snide remarks towards one another. Although Lee is offended by the pretentiousness of Austin's short, burdened responses to Lee's questions about his writing career, it is Austin's fabricated closeness to his parents that sets Lee off in the early scenes of the drama. When Austin mentions that he was down to visit their alcoholic father who lives in the desert (where Lee also lives), Lee responds, "What d'ya want, an award? You want some kinda' medal? You were down there. He told me all about you," establishing the connection to his father who is as gritty as Lee, withstanding the desert and all its harshness, something that Austin could never relate to in his Northern California home (Shepard 7).

Physical appearance then becomes a focus for Lee's distaste with the bourgeois lifestyle that Austin has created for himself and his family. After Austin tells Lee that his sloppy clothing will surely cause him to be picked up while burglarizing his mother's neighborhood, Lee articulates that appearance is not always such a definitive way of understanding personality. Lee answers, "Me? I'm gonna' git picked up? What about you? You stick out like a sore thumb. Look at you. You think yer regular lookin'?" (Shepard 8). He argues that while Austin might be clothed in similar garb as Mom's neighbors, his clothing does not hide his connection to his roots. Austin attempts to dress the part of a well-to-do, self-made man; however, Lee implies that there is a transparency

in his clothing that reveals the bloodline that makes him of lesser status than he claims to be. Once Lee insists on using Austin's car to assist him on his neighborhood burglaries, Austin's condescending offer, "Look, I can give you some money if you need money," results in the first violent gesture in the drama (Shepard 8). Lee "*suddenly lunges at Austin, grabs him violently by the shirt and shakes him with tremendous power,*" yelling "Don't you say that to me! Don't you ever say that to me!" (Shepard 8). Throughout the drama, Lee and Austin find ways to lord their status over one another. While Austin attempts to do so by acknowledging his "perfect" family, career, and class status, Lee does so by violence and typically ends up using his physicality to win the battles. However, even though Lee's violence instills fear in Austin, he is rarely able to draw emotion from his brother. Austin's calm demeanor in these escalating conflicts allows him to have the ability to lure violent reactions from Lee. In this case, though, Lee is eventually able to obtain the car keys from Austin, an exchange of power that is important to Lee's continuing bullying throughout the text.

Although Lee calls attention to Mom's house rules in the first scene of Act One, his desire to burglarize the neighborhood proves that Lee is anything but law-abiding. Additionally, he invades his mother's privacy and searches for ways into her cabinets to get his hands on her valuables. Lee says, "Made a little tour this morning. She's got locks on everything. Locks and double-locks and chain locks and – What's she got that's so valuable?" (Shepard 10). Although Austin suggests that she has "antiques" that have "personal value" locked away in her cabinets, Lee's response that it is "just a lotta' junk" suggests that he does not acknowledge the authenticity of these tokens, just as he dismisses the authenticity of Austin's American Dream lifestyle (Shepard 10). Yet if Lee

claims that these antiques are ersatz, this furthers Megan Williams' notion that a promise of history and stable identity is not accessible for these characters (Williams 62). The "phony" antiques, then, are a symbol for the empty familial history that causes the brothers' confusion over their true identities.

While the "antiques" represent the past and the brothers' familial origins that Lee deems "phony," Shepard brings the audience back to the contemporary by calling for the positioning of props on stage that exemplify our media driven world. While Austin pitches his screenplay to his hopeful producer, Saul Kimmer, Lee is taking advantage of the use of Austin's car. Austin nearly ties up the loose ends of a deal with Saul when "*Lee enters abruptly into kitchen carrying a stolen television set*" and "*sets T.V. on sink counter*" in the middle of Austin's pitch (Shepard 15). Because of Lee's insistence that Mom "don't like even a single tea leaf in the sink," the position of the television is important. The T.V. along with Austin's stolen toasters later in the play are placed right on the sink counter, littering her clean home with stolen goods. During the interview, Saul does tell Austin, "I mean we'll have to make a sale to television and that means getting a major star," thus, the television sitting on the kitchen counter could suggest that television is the new vehicle for monetary gain (Shepard 15). It seems fitting, then, that Austin and Lee spend the remainder of the drama with the television sitting on the counter, reminding them of the elevated financial status that their creative pursuits could lead to. The symbol of the T.V. reflects that the American Dream is no longer about self-fulfillment or creativity, but only about the production of profitable goods for financial growth.

Ultimately, a creative rivalry between the brothers germinates when Saul proposes that Austin “write a little outline” for the “true-to-life Western” that Lee has in mind (Shepard 19). Scene Four begins with “*Austin at glass table, typing*” the story that Lee dictates to him while “*sitting across from him, foot on table, drinking beer and whiskey*” (Shepard 20). Obviously treading on Austin’s art form and livelihood, Lee “*taps [the] paper with a beer can,*” distancing himself from the professionalism that Austin associates with being a writer. In the early scenes of this creative rivalry, the frustrations are small; Lee dictates the story to Austin who sees through the superficiality of the storyline. Lee, the cause of much of the destruction to the mother’s home throughout the drama, is the first to litter on the floor of the house. He “*turns violently towards windows in alcove and throws beer can at them*” after an argument over authorial decision-making (Shepard 22). Soon after, Lee argues, “I’m not like you. Hangin’ around bein’ a parasite offa’ other fools” (Shepard 22). What the brothers fail to see, though, is that they are both “parasites” in the confines of their mother’s home. Together, they suck the life out of the household which is illustrated through the dying plants and visible destruction within the house shown to the audience in the second act.

Shepard prepares the audience for the transference of identity between the two brothers in Act II when, at the close of the first act, Lee and Austin openly discuss that they both “always wondered what’d be like to be you” (Shepard 26). Lee even challenges Austin when he states, “I could be just like you then, huh? Sittin’ around dreamin’ stuff up. Getting’ paid to dream. Ridin’ back and forth on the freeway just dreamin’ my fool head off” (Shepard 25). Although Austin argues that being a writer is not as easy as Lee makes it seem, Lee has already begun to appropriate Austin’s writing

career by inserting himself into the meeting with Saul Kimmer. Along with the brothers' identity exchange is a shift in power that Lee dominates at this point in the drama. Austin crumbles under Lee's parody of his carefree middle class lifestyle when, after Lee asks, "What's the toughest part? Deciding whether to jog or play tennis," Austin responds, "You can stay here – do whatever you want to. Borrow the car. Come in and out. Doesn't matter to me. It's not my house. I'll help you write this thing or – not. Just let me know what you want. You tell me" (Shepard 25). Lee recognizes that Austin is now "at [his] service," and the final exchange of keys at the end of the act, after Austin only briefly has them in his possession again, confirms that the power is firmly in Lee's hands. After Austin "*takes the keys out of his pocket*" and "*sets them on the table*," Lee slowly takes them and "*plays with them in his hand*," taunting his brother by toying with the keys as if they are his own (Shepard 26). Once again, Lee has gained authority over Austin by influencing him to submit to his requests through his emasculating appropriation of both Austin's career and car.

At the start of Act II of *True West*, Austin is at the sink "*washing a few dishes*," continuing to keep his mother's home clean, while Lee reveals that Saul Kimmer loses a bet with him while playing golf and is forced to accept his pitch as a project (Shepard 28). Discernibly affected by the swiftness of Lee's deal, Austin swallows his damaged pride and "*gets glasses from cupboard, goes to refrigerator, and pulls out bottle of champagne*" to toast Lee. Yet, Lee, who steals televisions and sifts through his mother's antiques earlier in the drama, responds, "You shouldn't oughta' take her champagne, Austin. She's gonna' miss that," imposing on Austin a false set of moral values that seem more like a provocation than a realistic ethical plea (Shepard 29). It is not until Lee

mentions that Kimmer is dropping Austin's screenplay altogether that Austin initiates the communication breakdown and violence that ensues in the second act. Once Austin becomes aware that his screenplay has been dropped, Shepard directs the audience's attention to the phone. This prop works to advance the theme of disconnect between the brothers. Austin "*goes to phone on wall, grabs it, starts dialing... stays on phone, dialing, listens... hangs up phone violently, and paces*" (Shepard 30). Without a connection on the other line, Austin "*violently*" hangs up the phone, proving that the inability to communicate is closely linked with violence in Shepard's play. When Austin accuses Lee of hurting or threatening Saul on the golf course, Lee reacts by making a "*sudden menacing lunge towards Austin, wielding a golf club above his head*" (Shepard 31). The clubs that Lee either gambles for or steals from Saul Kimmer and uses to violently attack Austin are important because of their connection to Austin's loss of control over his career; Lee uses the clubs the first time to ruin Austin's career, and this time to violently assert his growing power over Austin.

The role reversal metamorphoses in Scene 7 into a visual spectacle on the stage as Austin turns into a drunken thief, while Lee shifts into the role of the hardworking screenwriter. The scene begins with "*Lee at typewriter struggling to type with the one finger system, [while] Austin sits sprawled out on kitchen floor with whiskey bottle, drunk*" (Shepard 36). Throughout the entire scene, the actions and gestures of the two brothers switch; as Lee attempts to write his screenplay, it is Austin who is bothersome and distracts Lee from his work while Lee reprimands Austin for drinking too much and desiring to go out into the neighborhood to steal items from people's homes. Austin even "*turns violently toward Lee, takes a swing at him, misses and crashes to the floor again,*"

adopting Lee's violent behavior. While the brothers are opposites in many cases, the role reversal suggests that Saul Kimmer is correct; Austin and Lee are two halves of one whole. In response to the brothers' role reversal in an interview conducted about *True West*, Sam Shepard states, "I wanted to write a play about double nature. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided.... If you could see it cinematically, you'd have one person playing both characters" (Bottoms 191). Thus, the symbiotic nature of the brothers' relationship is apparent as they swap their antithetical personalities between one another. The interdependence that sprouts from the two-sided nature of the brothers creates tension as they adopt the irritating behavior of their other half which increases the violence and dysfunction in the house.

As the symbiosis of the brothers comes into focus in the early scenes of the second act, Shepard also begins to acknowledge the intense dysfunction within the family by showing the audience the breakdown of communication between the two brothers which is symbolically displayed by the damage done to the various communicatory devices that are present on stage. The halt in communication first takes place as Lee is typing on the typewriter, but he "*gets the ribbon tangled up, [and] starts trying to re-thread it as they continue talking*" about Austin's interest in burglary (Shepard 37). The twisted ribbon is a metaphor for the tangled language that muddles the communication between Lee and Austin. As the rivalry becomes more intense between the two brothers and Austin instigates a drunken argument about whether or not he can steal items from people's houses in the neighborhood as Lee does, "*Lee gets more tangled up with the typewriter ribbon, pulling it out of the machine as though it was fishing line*" (Shepard 38). Visually, the ribbon wrapped tightly around Lee's body makes it look as if he is

suffocating, cutting off his voice and muting his ability to articulate his feeling or to put anything into words.

Adamant about stealing a toaster in order to show Lee that he has what it takes to fill his shoes, Austin ironically references the safety of the neighborhood that he and his brother burglarize. He states, "Everybody is livin' the life. Indoors. Safe. This is Paradise down here" (Shepard 39). However, Austin and Lee create an incredibly unsafe environment that is more accurately linked to the harsh desert than to Paradise. If the rivalry between the brothers truly does become visually linked to the massive debris on stage that Shepard calls a "desert junkyard," then it is apparent that the true issue at the crux of the dysfunctional family is the drunken father living in the desert. In his essay, "Staging Violence in West's 'The Day of the Locust' and Shepard's 'True West,'" Alex Vernon argues that "the question of inheritance is quite explicit in *True West*, as the brothers argue about who can take better care of their alcoholic father and of their mother's house" (Vernon 138). While Lee admits that he is still in contact with his father and would like to give him installments of money if his screenplay hits it big, Austin competitively recounts his own adventure into Mexico with the Old Man who loses his teeth on the trip. The stories show the animosity that Lee and Austin have towards one another regarding who will eventually care for the father, a subject that often leads to a visual display of violence between the brothers. These bouts of violence whenever the Old Man is discussed, prove that the desire for a sense of ownership over the father, as well as how they will inherit his reckless drunkenness, is evident in the drama. In attempt to establish their identities, the brothers look to their histories with their father by telling stories of their most recent encounters with him. However, because of the father's

recklessness, they can never actually extract any understanding of their father that could lead to the establishment of identity. What they fail to recognize is that they mirror the behavior of their father in the second act through their violence, recklessness and lack of respect for their mother's home.

The buildup of debris on stage throughout Act II is essential in understanding the growing tensions between Lee and Austin. While Shepard creates tension through costume, gestures, and conversation in Act I, in the second act he lets the debris and destruction to the set develop those tensions, as Lee and Austin unleash their violence both on each other and the objects in the house. In his stage directions, Shepard writes,

Lee seen smashing typewriter methodically then dropping pages of his script into a burning bowl set on the floor of alcove, flames leap up, Austin has a whole bunch of stolen toasters lined up on the sink counter along with Lee's stolen T.V., the toasters are of a wide variety of models, mostly chrome... empty whiskey bottles and beer cans litter floor of kitchen, they share a half empty bottle on one of the chairs in the alcove. Lee keeps periodically taking deliberate ax-chops at the typewriter using a nine-iron as Austin speaks, all of their mother's house plants are dead and dropping. (Shepard 42)

Shepard advances the visual symbolism of the props on stage in this scene, as Lee, who previously tangles himself in the typewriter's ribbon, now repeatedly smashes the typewriter, the vehicle for communication and the creative tool through which Austin has established his livelihood. The golf club that Lee utilizes to destroy Austin's typewriter

continues to remind the audience of the deal that Lee strikes with Saul that gets the two brothers into this position.

This collapse of expression and articulation is evident when Lee attempts to call a girl to keep him company. Frustrated with the operator because of the overwhelming number of "Melanie Fergusons in Bakersfield," Lee attempts to write down the phone numbers tied to that name, but he cannot find a pencil. He "*lets the phone drop then starts pulling all the drawers in the kitchen out on the floor and dumping the contents, searching for a pencil*" (Shepard 46). The pencil works as another visual symbol of Lee's inability to communicate; without the writing utensil, he does not connect with the outside world. Lee even "*rips the phone off the wall and throws it down,*" yet another symbol of destroyed communication, illustrating the level of frustration that his disconnect with Austin causes (Shepard 47).

As he continues his fit of destruction to the home, he burns written pages of the screenplay and drops phone numbers that he pulls out of his wallet into the fire, suggesting that his communication with Austin is not only destroyed, but his ability to interact with the outside world is burned up. This heat is emblematic of the desert imagery that Shepard makes explicit in the concluding scenes of the play, suggesting that their creativity, vitality and ability to communicate, like the desert, is barren. Similarly, the dead plants cannot grow in this desert environment, which is a direct representation of the lack of growth within the familial relationships. The dead plants and the artificial turf suggest that everything in the home is artificial, including their relationship.

The lined up toasters sitting next to Lee's more prestigious television are also direct symbols of the rivalry between the brothers. Both Lee and Austin bring stolen

goods into their mother's house, products that are indicative of a family atmosphere that others have but that these brothers do not have. Austin acknowledges the symbolism of the toast when he states, "Well it is like salvation sort of. I mean the smell. I love the smell of toast. And the sun's coming up. It makes me feel like anything's possible... like a beginning. I love beginnings" (Shepard 48). For Austin, the toast represents a new future; it is the possibility of a new day, and after his speech to Lee, he offers that possibility to him in the visible form of a plateful of toast. Yet, the damaged family shows its true colors:

Lee suddenly explodes and knocks the plate out of Austin's hand, toast goes flying, long frozen moment where it appears Lee might go all the way this time when Austin breaks it by slowly lowering himself to his knees and begins gathering the scattered toast from the floor and stacking it back on the plate, Lee begins to circle Austin in a slow, predatory way, crushing pieces of toast in his wake, no words for a while, Austin keeps gathering toast, even the crushed pieces. (Shepard 49)

Lee symbolically "crushes" Austin's sense of possibility and hope for the future when he steps on the toast. The way he "circles" Austin in a "predatory way" shows that Lee is preying on Austin, using every prop on stage as a way to advance his position over his younger brother. Soon after, Lee "*stares straight into Austin's eyes, then he slowly takes a piece of toast off the plate, raises it to his mouth and takes a huge crushing bite never taking his eyes off Austin's*" (Shepard 50). Lee feels that he is in ultimate control over Austin at this point; he tells Austin that he will write his screenplay for him word for word and this last "crushing bite" before the lights black out shows that he has the ability

to crush Austin's imagination and dreams. In "Reflections of the Past in *True West* and *A Lie of the Mind*," Leslie Kane writes, "Crashing into Austin's successful, independent, and carefully controlled world, Lee destroys Austin's autonomy, shatters his pride, and steals his identity and mobility" (Kane 144). It is in this scene that the audience sees Austin's dignity and independence fracture through Lee's destruction of the props on stage, specifically the typewriter and the toast, props that are linked directly to Austin.

This scene also poses great similarities to the family's disinterest in Weston's rebirth in *Curse of the Starving Class*. In both scenes, there is a moment of hope and promise for the future that has previously been damaged for both Austin and Weston, but the curses and family disjointedness are not that easy to do away with. Lee refuses to acknowledge the sense of hope for the future that Austin so dreamily expresses. Austin's desire to move his life forward, made explicit through the symbolism of the toast, is flawed because he fails to acknowledge his connection to his family. Williams agrees that "as a character who is never seen entering or exiting the stage, Austin cannot escape from the physical and psychological family space he inhabits" (Williams 68). Austin is trapped in his past, literally stuck with his older brother in their childhood home. While Austin is able to monetarily transcend his dysfunctional family's grip, his odd desires to leave his family up in the North country to live off of the unfruitful desert with his brother, Lee, who holds many more similarities to his father than Austin does, suggests that Austin is still plagued by the psychological connections to his family that he thought he was leaving behind.

Acknowledging the correlation between the stage space and the damaged minds of the characters, Bottoms writes, "The destruction of stable identity is mirrored by the

destruction of the stage spaces, which seem representative of the state of their occupants' psyches" (Bottoms 193-4). The intensity of the rivalry reaches its peak when Lee bites into Austin's emblem-filled toast; thus, the stage is most chaotic in the scene that follows, as the prop and set destruction follow the family's dysfunction. Shepard states that in the opening of Scene 9, *True West*'s final scene, the "*stage is ravaged*" and "*the effect should be like a desert junkyard at high noon*" (Shepard 50). To show that Lee and Austin have completely transformed the household into a "desert junkyard," Shepard emphasizes the heat of this final scene, and Lee is on stage "*with no shirt, beer in hand, sweat pouring down his chest... picking his way through the objects, sometimes kicking them aside*" (Shepard 50). The unbearable heat makes Lee resort to pouring "*beer on his arms and rubbing it over his chest,*" signifying not only the delirium of the scene, but also the physical immersion of his body in his Old Man's alcoholism, a possible cause of much of the family's damage. The heat also suggests that the fight between the brothers is "heating up," while the debris mounting on the stage space indicates that tensions continue to grow.

While Lee once again dictates his screenplay to Austin, who now, without a typewriter, needs to handwrite his notes, their mother enters the stage space with a "*conservative white skirt and matching jacket, red shoulder bag, and two pieces of matching red luggage,*" emphasizing her conventional costume and her uncreative, matching clothing and luggage (Shepard 2). Upon her return from Alaska, Mom surveys the "*sea of junk*" and "*damage*" caused by her two children (Shepard 53). Before Mom is even able to grasp the amount of damage done to her house, Austin discloses that he and Lee "are going out to the desert to live" (Shepard 53). However, what he neglects to see

is that they have created their own desert at home in their mother's household, and both Lee and Austin have been incredibly unfruitful in producing or accomplishing anything worthwhile because the desert is unfertile. While both brothers try their hand at creativity, there is no room for inventiveness in the dried out desert atmosphere. Mom recognizes, "You didn't get a chance to water I guess," intimating that the environment that they have fashioned for themselves is infertile (Shepard 54). The desert has also continually proven to be a barren landscape for their alcoholic father who mooches off anyone who can give him money. Kleb writes, "In the second half of *True West*, the Old Man's spirit seems to take over not only Austin but the house itself. Even Lee is unable to break free" (Kleb 119). Mom is able to see the Old Man's spirit within her two children when she tells them that they will "probably wind up on the same desert [as their father] sooner or later" (Shepard 53). Ultimately, Lee decides that he is uninterested in going to the desert with Austin, suggesting that Austin is not well-suited for life in the desert, adding to the rivalry over who is best suited to care for the father that they have both channeled while staying at Mom's house.

The final scene of the drama is visually powerful for the audience as Austin takes one of the communicatory devices from earlier in the act, the telephone that Lee rips off of the wall, and chokes Lee with the cord. The phone symbolizes connection, but it is clear that Austin and Lee cannot even use the device correctly; thus, every effort at connecting with one another is a failure. In this case, Austin actually uses the cord of the telephone to strangle Lee, further cutting off any type of communication or life from him. With Austin tightening the cord around Lee's neck, "*Lee tries to tear himself away and crashes across the stage like an enraged bull dragging Austin with him... they crash into*

the table and to the floor,” knocking more items to the floor to add to the junkyard atmosphere of the transformed home. As the brothers fight, Mom looks around and states, “I don’t recognize it at all,” suggesting that they have damaged the household so completely that she no longer feels like it is her home. Austin’s violence in this final scene “reads as another image of the resurfacing of an inherited blood curse” which is made explicit by Austin’s interest in moving to the desert, becoming closer to his father who is both violent and an alcoholic (Bottoms 195).

The keys that the brothers pass back and forth to each other throughout the drama are closely connected with power and are mentioned for a last time in the play when Austin shouts, “Gimme back my keys, Lee! Take the keys out! Take ‘em out!” (Shepard 57). Lee “*desperately tries to dig in his pockets, searching for the car keys... Lee finally gets the keys out and throws them on the floor but out of Austin’s reach*” (Shepard 57). Ultimately, Austin is able to retrieve his keys, gaining power over his brother who has held his upper hand position (as well as the keys) for the entirety of the drama up until this point. In the end, though, Lee and Austin are in a stand-off and Shepard writes, “*Lee is on his feet and moves toward exit, blocking Austin’s escape. They square off to each other, keeping a distance between them... the figures of the brothers now appear to be caught in a vast desert-like landscape*” (Shepard 59). It seems fitting that Shepard positions the brothers, two halves of one whole, in a stand-off at the end of the drama. Both vying for their status over one another, in the end neither has the upper hand. Their dueling characters are like animals, as Shepard previously likens Lee to an enraged bull, and it seems that they are prepared to fight to the death, unable to communicate in any

form, as all of Shepard's symbolic communicatory devices on stage have been severed or destroyed.

Shepard's unresolved conclusion to *True West* exemplifies the continuing inability for Austin and Lee to establish true identities for themselves. Vernon is correct when he states that "Lee and Austin's insults and fighting, their bickering for the car keys, suggest a confusion between adulthood and adolescence, an effect enhanced when their mother arrives and tells these men in their thirties beating one another nearly to death to 'Go outside and fight,'" and "being together reminds the brothers that they never established stable selves outside their antithetical relationship" (Vernon 136). All of the destruction on the stage, then, becomes a visual symbol for the frustrations these brothers experience because of their underdeveloped identities. Thus, the infantile rivalries and the failure to communicate are symptomatic of the inability to fulfill their quest for identity. Ultimately, Shepard describes the brothers as "*caught in a vast desert-like landscape*" as the lights black out on stage. This positions Austin and Lee in the desert atmosphere that their father inhabits. While both Lee and Austin claim to be exiting their mother's house, which becomes a symbol for the stagnancy in their growth, the final stage directions show the audience that as Lee blocks the door, neither brother is able to escape; they are stuck in the home of their youth, in a landscape similar to the region in which their alcoholic father resides, keeping one another from moving forward and establishing identities of their own.

Conclusion

Many critics overlook Shepard's comprehensive stage directions, focusing only on the relationships between characters or the violence committed in these drama. However, the preceding three chapters regarding Shepard's family trilogy prove that the metaphors and symbols attached to Shepard's command of set design, costume, gestures and props are worth the attention given to them in this thesis. To neglect the importance of these elements is to miss a crucial part of Shepard's commentary on the dysfunctional families in the trilogy.

Shepard's declaration that he "always liked the idea that plays happened in three dimensions, that there was something that came to life in space rather than in a book" comes as no surprise to the audience since his plays are so visually dynamic (Zinman 509). Shepard makes use of the entirety of the stage in all three of his family plays, and with his artful positioning of props and characters he establishes a stage space that certainly "comes to life." By utilizing props that are natural to a domestic atmosphere, Shepard advances the metaphors and symbols that are linked to the decaying families in *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, and *True West*. The domestic props such as the empty refrigerator, torn sofas and tangled typewriter ribbon establish a realistic connection to the crumbling families that are burdened by sick ancestral lines. Bottoms agrees that the realistic atmosphere established for the audience in these plays is primarily due to the domestic set design. He notes that the sets are "crammed with the minutiae of actual domestic activity. There is, for example, a working stove on which real food is cooked in sizzling fat, producing real sounds and smells" (Bottoms 168).

Shepard's most dynamic command of stage space, though, is through the characters' destruction of the props and set. Urinating on stage, smashing bottles of booze, and pummeling the typewriter with a golf club not only stun the audience, but these destructive gestures further the visual metaphors of the dysfunctional families. Ultimately, Shepard's directions artfully translate onto the stage so that the audience is witness to the decline of these families and their struggling, often stagnant relationships with one another.

Although tiny glimpses of hope shine through the cracks of the families' broken foundations, Shepard primarily creates foreboding futures for each of the families in *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, and *True West*. While Emma's earnestness to run away and repair broken cars in the new future that she envisions for herself indicates that she is unlike her family members, her probable death at the close of *Curse* is Shepard's warning that the curse is still present. Similarly, at the close of *Buried Child*, although the land is fertile, Vince's arrival as the new patriarch of the family, seemingly having learned no lessons from those who have come before him, implies that the family's doomed fate is unchanged. Finally, the standoff at the conclusion of *True West* indicates that Lee and Austin are stuck, unable to resolve their sibling rivalry.

Through his stage directions, Shepard is able to comment on the American families that are brutally destroyed by the pressures of society and the inability to interact with one another in meaningful ways. The older generations breed future generations of children plagued by their ancestors' curses in Shepard's plays, and his visual elements enhance the metaphors that are linked with the family's flaws.

Works Cited

- Adler, Thomas P. "Repetition and Regression in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*." *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*. Ed. Matthew Roudane. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 111-22. Print.
- Bartels, Brian. "Sam Shepard's Master Class in Playwriting." *The Missouri Review*. 30.2 (2007): 72-88. *Project Muse*. Web. 27 Feb. 2011.
- Bottoms, Stephen J. "Strychnine in the Gut: *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) and *Buried Child* (1978)." *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 152-81. Print.
- Bottoms, Stephen J. "The Real Thing: *True West* (1980) and *Fool For Love* (1983)." *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 152-81. Print.
- Callens, Johan. *Dis/Figuring Sam Shepard*. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang S.A., 2007. Print.
- Kane, Leslie. "Reflections of the Past in *True West* and *A Lie of the Mind*." *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*. Ed. Matthew Roudane. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 139-53. Print.
- Kleb, William E. "*Curse of the Starving Class* and the Logic of Destruction." *Contemporary Theatre Review*. 8.4 (1998): 1-17. *Project Muse*. Web. 28 Nov. 2009.
- Kleb, William. "Worse Than Being Homeless: *True West* and the Divided Self." *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*. Ed. Bonnie Marranca. New York, NY: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981. 117-25. Print.
- Shepard, Sam. *Buried Child*. New York: Bantam Books, 1979. Print.

- Shepard, Sam. *Curse of the Starving Class*. New York: Bantam Books, 1976. Print.
- Shepard, Sam. *True West*. New York: Bantam Books, 1976. Print.
- Taav, Michael. *A Body Across the Map: The Father-Son Plays of Sam Shepard*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000. Print.
- Vernon, Alex. "Staging Violence in West's *The Day of the Locust* and Shepard's *True West*." *South Atlantic Review*. 65.1. (2000): 132-51. JSTOR. Web. 30 Nov. 2009.
- Westgate, J. Chris. "Negotiating the American West in Sam Shepard's Family Plays." *Modern Drama*. 48.4 (2005): 726-743. Project Muse. Web. 28 Nov. 2009.
- Weiss, Katherine. "Sam Shepard's Family Trilogy: Breaking Down Mythical Prisons." *Staging a Cultural Paradigm: The Political and the Personal in American Drama*. Eds. Barbara Ozieblo and Mariam Lopez-Rodriguez. Brussels: Presses Interuniversitaires Europeennes, 2002. 323-338. Print.
- Williams, Megan. "Nowhere Man and the Twentieth-Century Cowboy: Images of Identity and American History in Sam Shepard's *True West*." *Modern Drama*. 40 (1997): 57-73. Project Muse. Web. 28 Nov. 2009.
- Tzioumakis, Yannis. "The Poetics of Performance in the Cinema of David Mamet: Against Embellishment." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*. 39.1 (2006): 88-99. JSTOR. Web. 27 Feb. 2011.
- Zinman, Toby Silverman. "Visual Histrionics: Shepard's Theatre of the First Wall." *Theatre Journal*. 40.4 (1988): 509-18. JSTOR. Web. 18 May 2010.